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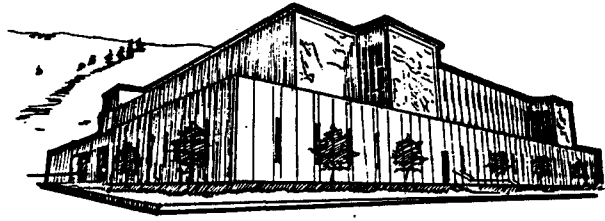
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University of
Montana

STORIES OF HUMANS AND OTHER ANIMALS

By

Karyn Sandstrom

B.A. University of Oregon, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

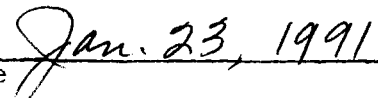
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To Per
Who likes almost anything I do

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Aptitudes and interests. Some people give more importance to the former so they know they will be good at what they do. Others choose their life work according to their interests and don't worry overmuch whether they will be great at what they're interested in.

In my sixth grade year, northeastern Ohio school districts implemented aptitude tests so families could know what their children's natural talents were. My father was excited to hear that my aptitudes led me in the direction of sales. I had a creative mind and strong verbal abilities. The insurance profession would undoubtedly benefit some day from my skills. The coders and testers provided some alternative professions as well, but lowest on the list was my ability to perform well in any of the sciences. This seemed accurate enough to me at the time since science class led to one parent-teacher conference after the next. Science was tricky and boring at the same time.

Despite being so bad at science, I was curious about everything around me. I collected and watched frogs for years, I grew anything that looked like a seed, I kept track of refrigerator molds, and I once tried to bite off a particular taste bud to discover which taste it was responsible for. I never perceived these things as being remotely connected to the long words and memorized charts of science.

Eventually I began to recognize what people considered science and what fell into the category of "other stuff," and

I stuck to the latter. All through my undergraduate years I blocked out things that fell into the category of science, knowing that I couldn't understand it all that well.

I didn't go into insurance. I did, however, continue to read books about disappearing animals, watch movies about animal behaviors, and prod and poke at dead animals in alleys. I found that I could figure out why animals did what they did, why they lived in certain places, and what they needed to survive. I surprised my husband's wildlife colleagues with wildlife observations and anecdotes. All this knowledge with no aptitude at all.

Now schools have more sophisticated tests that measure not only your aptitude, but your "learning style." I took one of these too, and the analysis explained that I would have troubles with math and sciences. Now my question. Are certain aptitudes and "learning styles" a requirement to understand certain bodies of knowledge?

I think the answer is no. Although certain bodies of information may be easier to grasp with the right aptitude, aptitudes and learning styles don't need to limit. A non-analytical person who believes that strong analytical abilities are a requirement for learning sciences will miss colors, shapes, movements, ideas,...life. What that person needs is an alternative road to take him or her to that knowledge. What follows is that people who have knowledge that they want to share must find many ways to present the information.

My interest is animals. More specifically, humans and animals. When I direct daycamps I schedule animal weeks. When I teach creative dance, I have the dancers choreograph animal dances. Art shows become wildlife art shows and show and tell becomes pet day. When deciding on a professional paper, I knew I wanted to write about animals and humans, but I wanted to write for people who don't pick up animal magazines. My solution was to write short stories about humans and animals, publishable in mainstream magazines.

Writers begin stories any way they can. Some have a technique that works for them, but most sit at bar stools or coffee booths, drinking magic potions in hopes that a story will fill them along with their drink. Most first drafts of stories take place in bars and coffee shops.

A character, a plot, a setting, a moment- I have begun stories with all of these. But the most absurd way to begin a story, if the story is to be any good at all, is to begin with a theme.

I am no literary critic, but I can try to describe theme. Definitions of theme are always in the negative, which means that lots of people know what theme isn't. It's not the message, not the moral, not the plot, etc. To try defining it in the affirmative, theme is what the story says about the idea contained within it. It's not enough to say a theme is about humans' relationships with animals; theme goes a step farther. Theme comments on the idea of humans'

relationships with animals. Stories are supposed to do all these things. But in the same way that homes create their smells, stories give birth to themes, not the other way around.

Themes are precisely what I started these stories with. I spent a year asking other writers, "Have you ever written a successful story starting out with a theme?" Really, not an unusual question between novice writers. Each person either twisted their face as though I had asked them to describe the wiring in their washing machine, or they threw traumatic warnings at me to avoid godly expectations of myself as a writer. Like giggles or good bean soup, themes happen; they are not made.

Writing a successful story about anything that says anything is usually goal enough for a writer. But if I intend to teach science or animal ethics through stories, I felt I needed to begin and stay with strong, particular themes. These stories are my attempts to remind people of our responsibilities to other animals. I hope they work.

Young Science

I didn't want to like Amanda when she first came to school in fifth grade. She is smart, small and rich and looks like a drawing from a coloring book. She wears clothes that fit like uniforms; blue and white are her favorite colors. I am more the kind that likes plaids, stripes, zippers and snaps. The only sport she is good at is riding horses, English she'll tell you, like you're supposed to know what that means. I know she is good because she has ribbons on her fireplace mantle in her bedroom along with a black velvet hard hat and a miniature whip. These are the only things to look at in her room because her mother, who is the kind who still thinks frogs give you warts, won't let Amanda tape anything to the walls. I know what her bedroom looks like because we are friends now, Amanda and me. We are lab partners.

Fifth grade is the first year of science lab in Mason School because otherwise you're too young. I've walked past the lab for four years peeking into the window that runs along the side of the door. Just inside the window is a cabinet displaying fetal pigs floating in pickle jars. From the hallway a person can see a fetus of three weeks and six weeks before the door blocks your view.

In third grade my gym class used to finish right when the seventh grade girls, who called themselves gals, came into the lockerroom to change into their science lab clothes.

Once I asked why they had to change for science and one of the gals told me that animal juice sometimes dripped down their wrists and into their sleeves. Once I saw blood on someone's work t-shirt. Because of my early years in Mason, I already had an idea what kind of things went on in science lab. That's maybe why I had an easier time with it than Amanda.

The reason we became lab partners is because that's how our science teacher, Mr. Boyd, keyed us out. We were both born during our mothers' most reproductive years, we suffered no serious illnesses before we were five, we have relatively low levels of pigment in our skin, and we have no birth marks on any of our limbs. Before that day I hadn't thought Amanda and me were alike at all. She's been my best friend for 11 months now, even though we ran out of things to say to each other after a couple weeks.

I have a great memory for unimportant things, so I write about my life in my diary in code. I can always remember what I meant. The reason I mention my diary is because I can tell the exact day that I fell in love with Mr. Boyd. At the bottom of September second, the day after Labor Day, I wrote "M.B. = #1."

Mr. Boyd has a beard and no wrinkles around his eyes. He has scary amounts of hair on his arms and a laugh that sounds like it comes out of a much bigger person. He doesn't have baby toenails which means that he is more evolved than Amanda and me. He smells like formaldehyde and Wintergreen

Lifesavers, and does everything so fast that he never ever knew that I was in love with him.

On the first day of science lab, which was Amanda's first day at school, Mr. Boyd explained from behind his desk that he wouldn't put up with any creampuffs. Science was real life and by fifth grade we were supposed to be ready for it. I knew this and nodded like a marine with everyone except Amanda. She sat on her science stool like she had an invisible whiplash, neck supporter on and stared at a dead snake that was cut in half in a pie pan that Mr. Boyd had set on the floor when he couldn't find any room on his desk to sit on. Waiting for the bus that afternoon I told Amanda that I planned on being a research biologist. She asked me if I was going to have a shellacked pig foot as a pencil holder like Mr. Boyd's. "How do I know?" I said. Those are the kinds of questions Amanda asks. It's why boys don't come and talk to me when she is around.

"Amanda hates science," is what I wrote on Thursday the 9th of October. That was the day when Mr. Boyd passed around a pin cushion and asked us to choose a colored hat pin each. Amanda and me seriously argued over the best colors until Mr. Boyd finally said, "You girls take your decisions seriously, That is a sign of a scientist." Amanda plans on being an Art Historian, but she nodded with me because we stick tight in public. We don't belong to a clique.

Mr. Boyd handed us each a map of a cat and told us he had a great surprise. We watched him feeling around in a

rumpled grocery bag trying to grab something clumsy with one hand while rummaging through his tool drawer with his other hand. Amanda and me sat stiff like fake sleepers waiting for the sound of an alarm clock. When he finally lifted the mangy cat from the bag, almost everyone was silent.

"How did he die?" Amanda asked. She didn't ask it like she really wanted to know, but more like she wanted Mr. Boyd to have to tell us. She used the same tone that my mom uses sometimes and my dad has to say to her, "just let it lie, Jean," or "let's not beat that dead old horse again."

But Mr. Boyd tried to answer her even though he didn't have to if he didn't want to. He said that the cat's job in life was to die for science. He thought some more and chewed on his lower lip with his front teeth. His teeth are really white. He said the cat wasn't anyone's pet. That the cat never had much of a life, so it didn't mind being dead.

Amanda had that look on her face that I had seen when I once tried to tell her that people didn't talk to her because they were jealous of her. A disappointed kind of look that my mom sometimes wears right before she tells my dad, "do you think I'm stupid or what?" Mr. Boyd shook his leg that he was half standing on and turned away from Amanda. He reminded us all not to be creampuffs.

My job was to stick my pin in the small intestines of the split cat. It wasn't much different from poking holes into a hamburger package or skewering a hot dog, but Amanda wouldn't do it. She told Mr. Boyd that "under the

circumstances she could not participate in this project," and then she told me that my mother would be extremely disappointed in me for condoning such an activity.

My father didn't know what condoning meant either when I told him what had happened, but he thought it was pretty typical of Amanda not to touch a dead cat but to still eat meat. My mom asked me how it made me feel to participate, me being a cat owner for all my life, and I reminded her that the cat was dead. She looked at me the way she would after biting into some foreign, uncooked food. A face that said, "how odd."

Even though we were keyed out the same, Amanda and me have our differences. Maybe that's the reason I don't listen to her all that much. Sometimes you have to ignore a person if you want to stay best friends with them. The biggest difference between us is that she doesn't like to see lots of things and I want to see everything.

For example, I have a picture that I cut out of a library book and I taped it in my diary. It's a picture drawn of the Boxer Rebellion where three men with loincloths are on their knees with their wrists tied behind their backs. Soldiers are holding onto their ponytails, forcing their heads towards the ground while another man stands ready with a bloody knife. Heads with Chinese eyes roll around the edges of the picture and in the background are thick rows of people watching the executions. The spectators aren't smiling, but they look interested.

I showed it to Amanda and my mom when they were making pie at the kitchen counter one day after school. Amanda's mother never makes anything with flour. Amanda looked at the picture for less time than it takes for me to crack my knuckles before turning her head away like the book would burn her eyes out.

"Disgusting," my mom said. "Why watch such a thing?"

"Because you're interested," I explained to her, mistaking her question for a real one.

Both Amanda and my mother looked at me as if I had just cut my own hair. I told them I thought that they were too emotionalistic when they got together, and that they needed to be their own persons. I took a quiz that tested whether I was my own person, and it said that I very definately was.

My mother didn't used to get so shocked over me until Amanda started spending her afternoons with us. Then she had someone else to help her be scared of life with. They convinced eachother that my toad hospital was too dangerous to keep in the T.V. room. My baby sister might get toad slime in her mouth, so I had to move them to the garage. They also decided that my cinnamon roll-on lip gloss gives boys the wrong impression. Whenever I'd get mad at their rules, my mom would tell me how much I had changed. Mothers have it tough when their girls grow up and aren't just like them.

In my diary on Monday, January 13th I wrote, "Reading Time Magazine in study hour." I never read Time, but I

looked at pictures to see some true life. There are a lot of dead people in this world. Each Monday for the whole winter I sat in study halls wearing a stretch band across my forehead to pull back my bangs and I crossed my legs high above my knees. I wore lots of beads and chokers and tried to remember to sit on one hip. Body language is important for a girl when she isn't beautiful. Mr. Boyd was study monitor on Mondays, but he never asked me about my adult magazine. He did ask me a lot about my gerbils though, and reminded me that he thought I had a real knack for small mammals.

I have successfully raised 63 gerbils at home thanks to a book my Mom found me at the library. I started out with only two gerbils and then got a second female that wasn't related to either of the first two gerbils. Soon I had to check the sexes of all the gerbils to keep them from taking over the basement. I build my own cages, rotate the excercise wheels, change the cedar chips each week, collect toilet paper tubes from the school janitor, and don't mind it much when I get bit. It only hurts for a second.

Mom told Mr. Boyd about my gerbils at parent/teacher conferences and after that I was put in charge of the lab mice. The first thing I did was to ask Mr. Boyd to help me rig up an electrical lid so that it sent mild shocks up the arms of the eighth grade boys when they tried to take it off to harass the mice.

Amanda is the only person who I taught how to turn off

the lid. She wasn't very fond of mice at first, but she started to understand them more and more each time she watched me take care of them. She even asked the stable boys to get rid of the snaptraps in the place where she keeps her horses. She's really paying for saying that, but she says she doesn't care what the stable hands think about her. There are already so many people who don't like her that I guess a couple more don't make much difference to her.

The day that Mr. Boyd unwired the lid of the mouse cage during class, Amanda told him that she felt the maze was totally unnecessary since psychologists already knew the answers to our class' hypotheses. He told her she could go read a book.

All the boys who had asked for more hat pins for the cat carcass had stationed themselves at different corners of the maze with airhorns. Mr. Boyd asked me to help him drop the mice in the maze, and then everyone but Amanda stretched over the edge to watch for test results. First Kingpin got blasted away from the sunflower seeds and then Shango scrambled away from the poppy seed dish. Soon the mice realized that even the pumpkin seeds were unsafe.

Some of the other kids lied that they couldn't see well enough and they went back to their desks to read too, but I kept an eye on my hungry mice who huddled in a pile in a corner of the maze. Another bad part of life. Mr. Boyd tried to excuse the people who left by saying that the world only needs so many scientists and that it's good to know from

an early age whether you're the scientific type or the emotional type.

When the eighth grade boys heard about the experiment, they side-stepped my electrical lid and squeezed the bulbs of the airhorns over the mouse cage every morning to watch the mice run from their food. When Kingpin died I told my mom. She cried and called Mr. Boyd, and Mr. Boyd locked the horns into the tool cupboard. But the mice had already lost their mousehoods. There isn't much stability in the lives of mice; they survive only because they are so suspicious of everything. But all living creatures can usually count on something. When those mice lost their faith in seeds, there was nothing left in their lives to not be afraid of.

You would have thought that it was me that felt the worst about the mice. After all, I'm the one who has a knack with small mammals. But it doesn't matter in this world who feels the worst about things because some people just know how to stink up the air better than others. My dad says that people like Amanda aren't as miserable as they seem since they get so much attention, and he could be right. I am more the move-ahead kind of person. Of course I had bad dreams about the mice, and I definately didn't like Mr. Boyd so much as before, but I wasn't going to sit on myself to see how long I could feel bad.

Sometimes I think Amanda and me will be best friends forever, even when we get married and have kids. Other times I thank my blessings that her dad is in the foreign service.

Her dad can speak Russian, and that would be pretty far away.

In the beginning of April my diary says, "M.B. can play the William Tell Overture through his nostrils on the harmonica," an entry that refers to the news that everyone already knew by the time Amanda pulled me into a corner of the library to tell me about a "tragic occurance." The worst times to be Amanda's friend is when she tries to be like the rest of us. She looked me in the eyes and held onto my wrists the way my grandmother does, and asked me if I knew about Mr. Boyd and Miss Dundee, the music teacher.

Miss Dundee wears belts and hats and high heel shoes with no toes so that you can see her toenail polish even in winter. When she walks she swings and bobs, shushes her pantyhose, and leaves invisible jet streams behind her of perfume that smell like lemon merangue pie. You can't not know that she's around.

When I was in first grade she caught Deon Geyer chewing gum during our Christmas music assembly. She made him sing in front of the whole school with gum on his nose. That is the kind of woman Mr. Boyd serenaded with his harmonica.

Of course I had heard the rumors before Amanda ever told me, but I hadn't needed to make a public statement about it until then. "Well God Amanda, I knew that. But I like Mr. Boyd as a scientist, not as a person," is what I said. She looked relieved, and I felt relieved that she believed me. The next week I read a book called "How To Be The Girl That

Every Boy Wants to Know Without Getting a Reputation."

If I would let you look through my diary of my fifth grade year, you would notice that my life changed in the springtime when Mr. Boyd began taking voice lessons from Miss Dundee. From mid April all the codes disappear which means that my personal life was no longer absorbing enough to keep track of. The pages are instead filled with columns, abbreviations, numbers and water stains.

Since I was six, I have collected toads from the window wells along the side of our house. Toads tend to jump down into the safe-looking holes when lawnmowers and cats are around, and then they aren't all smart enough to use the ramps that I have set up for them to get out. Before I eat breakfast I make a point of wheeling my old doll carriage past the window wells to check for stranded toads who in the early spring are often frozen in the corners. My mother taught me how to put them in a special casserole dish and bake them on LOW heat in the oven to revive them. I used to just keep them until they were healthy, but when my mother found me a book on the art of wildlife management, I decided to keep them longer to code their behaviors and experiment with their habitats.

By the end of April I already had my first sample size recorded and had discovered some statistically significant findings. I monitored their movements until the toads were as predictable as my father: I knew their suburban foraging patterns, their curb-side cover requirements and their after

school garage distribution. When the carriage became too full and their space requirements weren't being met, I set them free in the bog near the baseball diamond and recorded the directions that they hopped. By the end of spring I was more familiar with toads than most people are with their bathroom habits.

It's a crime how little people know about toads. If you ask people whether tadpoles get their back legs or their front legs first, they probably won't be able to tell you even though they walk past whole ponds of them every day. It's not like I kiss up to my teachers or anything, but I did show Mr. Boyd my charted results. He was definately impressed with my extra work and told the whole class that my niche seemed to extend beyond small mammals and into reptiles. Amanda got some of the credit too because she figured out the math part of my studies. Amanda's knack for math is something that you've got to respect.

In science lab we began studying the last section in our book which was on a man named Descartes. He spent lots of his life thinking that his body might not be real. By the time he was done with his career he decided that his body did exist, but he had to take apart a lot of animals to figure this out. I had troubles explaining the connections to my mother. The chapter in my book on vivisection showed us how he was careful with his knives so he could keep dissected animals alive for as long as possible. I didn't read my science book very thoroughly last spring.

Everything that has happened since Descartes is only in my long term memory because I stopped writing anything in my diary. I even stopped coding toad behavior. What happened at the end of last spring made me know that not only could I never marry a scientist, but I could never be one.

"Find the one you like," Mr. Boyd had said, "and bring it over to you and your partner's operation table."

Amanda had to pick our frog from the bucket because I was all caught up in the glossy picture that Mr. Boyd had tacked to the bulletin board of a spread-eagle frog with all its organs numbered. It was a side of frogs that I had never seen before. She returned to our desk with her hands cupped and kept her eyes on the cracks between her fingers where a thin green mouth kept poking through.

"If you pith the frog just right it won't feel a thing," he said as he grabbed one of the remaining frogs by the leg and dangled it like it was a banana peel he just picked off the floor. "But if you're afraid of it, you'll probably have to do it over and over again."

On the chart a red arrow pointed to the exact place we were supposed to stick the needle, and Mr. Boyd rolled his thumb across the backbone of the frog to try to get familiar with the spot. He told us all to move in close so we could see exactly how to do it.

Mr. Boyd had a special cork board for an operating table which I could see was slippery from previous surgeries.

"Some scientists decapitate the frogs with a miniature

guillotine, but that method doesn't assure you that you'll see the heartbeat," he said, and set the frog on the cork board.

I used to find it amazing that people didn't know the difference between a toad and a frog. But staring at the frog that Mr. Boyd had pressed flat with his hairy forearm, I managed to key out some of their similarities. I am quite sure that my wildlife studies on toads would benefit a person studying frogs.

The frog's legs wiggled in a swim kick whenever Mr. Boyd took some of the pressure off his forearm. It was probably the first time that the frog ever stayed in one place while kicking and I could tell it was surprised that it wasn't moving anywhere. Frogs can't move their heads when their bodies are held in one place, but this frog's kicking was causing lots of problems for Mr. Boyd's aim. He followed the neck around with the pin for a long, quiet time and finally had two boys hold its legs straight to stop it from squirming. In that position the frog reminded me of Jesus on the cross.

I'm telling this story matter of factly because the facts are what keep me thinking clear. I stood next to Amanda like a cool potato while she held our frog against her navy blue sailer shirt, her eyes squeezed tight. Pithing frogs is science too, and like my dad says, you have to take life's goods with its bads. Mr. Boyd was doing his job and the frog was doing its job. My job was to learn something

from watching the whole thing, and like I have always said, I am the kind of person who makes a point of seeing everything.

Being a curious, factual person, I was the most surprised person in the room when Mr. Boyd finally tacked the frog to the cork as if it were a telephone message and made me throw up. I had no warning at all. No warm, creeping feeling up my back, no watery mouth, no alert gags. I could hardly get my mouth open on time to let it all out.

If anyone would have told me at the beginning of fifth grade that I was destined to publicly throw up in front of Mr. Boyd on one of the last days of fifth grade I would have lived my whole year differently. I would never have wasted so many wishes on him. I have since read that a crush can take over your life like a cancer and can keep you from meeting other boys.

Secondly I would have tried to be more interested in my other classes. I can see now that I am the type that needs to be careful when making career choices. My mother for once agrees with my dad that I am making a mountain from a mole hill. She says I shouldn't give up my work as a scientist just because I have feelings. My mom is going to introduce me to a scientist friend of hers who gets paid to listen to birds. She doesn't have to kill them or anything.

And last of all, if I had known about the throw-up thing from the beginning of the year, I would have treated Amanda more like a best friend should. When she heard me start to gag that day, she opened her eyes, dumped out the

remaining frogs onto the floor, and held the bucket under my mouth. It was a little late by then, but she helped me clean up in the bathroom sink afterwards. While I had my mouth under the faucet she said that it's not what I know that makes me her best friend, but what I feel, and that my throwing up on the frog made her proud to be my best friend. That's what she said anyways.

On our way out of the bathroom she asked if I would be her summer swimming partner, and since the last day of school we have spent every afternoon at her club. She can't wait for sixth grade because that's the year we get to use acrylics. You wouldn't believe what a fast swimmer Amanda is.

The Yakherder

From his Himalayan bhaTTi, Senge could see as far as four walking hours down his steep shale valley to the far green triangle that was his home in the off season. Sitting on his favorite rock, he guessed how much time he could wait before putting on potatoes for the foreign people who walked up his valley. The way this particular hiker moved up the lower part of the slippery trail, Senge figured he'd be staring down the valley all day so he went inside his stone hut for a nap. Three shadows of sleep later, when Senge aimed his stream at the distant head, the walker still hadn't crossed the river basin. With today being his last day of his hut-care obligations, he considered tying tight his shoes and heading down, but by habit he started cutting potatoes.

Potatoes were all he had at this time of the year, but the pinks didn't complain since they were surprised anyone was at the hut at all. Senge's hut held onto a shelf at the bottom of a steep wall of scree cut with rope-thin switchbacks that guided walkers over a pass into the Thak valley. His was the last resting point before the day-long crossing over the great Thorang La: a pass known for its moving mountains and black clouds. Nepali traders rarely risked the rumbling route, but the foreigners seemed to carry their terror over the top no matter what the cost; snow sight, black toes, high mountain sickness - they chewed on

their fears and spat them at the mountains. At the top they puffed out their chests for pictures.

Senge knew this because he'd hauled up their packs for a price; he probably stacked thirty cairns on the pass this season alone. Buried lots of extra rupies in the floor from those walks. Nine years of working for rupies had made his name bright in the village. None of his living friends were spoken of so respectfully as Senge was.

This particular walker had taken so long to make it to his hut, that Senge had already eaten the first batch of potatoes, and the second batch was getting cold. Finally the long haired man ducked under the low doorframe the way a great grandfather would and never quite stretched full up once in the smoky room. Even though he was thick with clothes, his face and lips were a stormy color of blue. Skin of the dead had never looked so dead, and Senge found himself wondering out loud why the leftover animal hair that the pinks still carried never seemed to keep them warm. The man tried to crouch next to the fire, but his bending places seemed to be frozen into the awkward angles of a pregnant woman.

Senge pulled a bail of hay near to the fire for the self-made cripple and tried to support him as he sat down. He pulled off the man's mittens and rubbed the icy sticks between his hot, brown hands while the foreigner breathed shallowly through frosty face hair. Senge began pulling off the the man's wet boots, but stopped when the man groaned

from pain like a sick yak. So instead he helped him lift the boulder feet and propped them on the stove. The big, sick man breathed harder trying to hold himself from tipping backwards, so Senge set his feet a bit lower.

"Very sick. Tomorrow down with Senge."

"No way man. Goin' over the top. Made it 13 thousand already... goin' the last three thousand tomorrow."

No different than the other foreigners. He'd end up going over, or trying, but this time Senge wouldn't risk helping. His family expected him home tomorrow, and he wasn't going to miss the welcome lentils.

"How many rupees to get my pack to the top?"

"Bloody nose, slow fingers, thick mouth. No pack to top"

Not even for the Warrior King of the Black Crag would he go up Thorang La with this dying man. He had once had to carry down a melon-shaped woman who had almost made it to the top before turning blue and dropping like an ice slab to the ground. He had put on her wide boots and harnessed her jiggling body to his back for the steep haul back to his shelter while her limping friend dragged the packs down the mountain in the dirt and complained that the round one's feet were probably cold. This hairy man was already blue and ready to crash the floor just from trying to stay seated, and he looked like he'd be heavier than the woman had been.

Senge hoped the walker would at least hold out through the night so he wouldn't have to carry him down from his

hut tomorrow, never mind carrying him from the pass. Despite the many years of working with them, Senge was always surprised at the pinks general stupidity. Of course he didn't expect them to be clever like the mountain people--they hadn't gone through enough cycles of life to be that sharp--but considering how recently they had been animals, why didn't they have more animal sense? Any animal so sick as the pink would never continue a journey. The pinks seemed to drift in a no-minds world. Not a man's mind, not an animal mind.

Senge tried getting the man to eat. Even though he made lots of good food noises as he cut the potatoes into finger tip pieces, the foreigner only took a couple bites before throwing up in the corner. So Senge cooked up a thick batch of yak butter tea, but that did not stay down either.

"Really, really sick man. You are the sick pink man." he said as the foreigner sat back down in front of the fire. Senge had finally managed to get the rock boots off, but when he saw the man's potatoe-sized toes, he knew they'd have to stuff those burning balls back into the boots before they doubled in size. Growing toes were a sure sign of mountain sickness, and Senge had never seen toes so anxious to be in the flat fields.

"Not good. Very not good toes." The pink barked like a deer as Senge pinched the foul toes back into the wet leather boots, but became quiet once Senge zipped him, boots and all, into the warm sleeping bag. Before he ploughed into sleep on

the hay bales, the man begged Senge to be his porter, but Senge only responded by pointing out that sick pinks can't cross passes.

Senge lay awake all night under his heavy layers of damp wool listening to his guest flop around in the bag and let out loud air blasts. Bad mountain sickness. This walker must work where the trees had leaves. He had probably angered Great Lord the Soil God by leaving his flat lands during harvest. By morning the foreigner was tangled into the strings of his bag from rolling around so much and lay curled in a dying animal position. Senge slipped out of his warm envelope of a bed and shuffled over to examine the man's blue face. Frog eyes, leaking nose, meat lips--his body was as useless as a merchant in a barley field. Senge started what he hoped would be the last fire of the season in his oil-caked stove.

The smell of the spitting garlic woke the traveller who moved his eyes without moving his head until he caught sight of a buffy pika whiskering around on Senge's lap. The man glanced back and forth from the no-tailed rabbit to the spitting pan a few times before Senge got suspicious and hid the pika back in its nest of buckwheat. The man had thought he was hungry anyway, but he didn't prove to be a good judge of his stomach because the potatoes Senge fried for breakfast ended up topping off the growing pile of potato rejects in the corner.

"What kind of porter forces a sick man up the pass with

such a heavy pack. I've got rupees for Christ's sake," the man said as he squatted stiffly in the corner over the pile.

If Senge considered the money for even a moment, the thought smoked out of his mind at the smell of the potato corner. He would make no money from an ego that had to be carried down the pass by an ancient, skinny porter. Strangers lost big face when they couldn't make it over, and if you were the human around when they dropped before the pass, you did not become the pocket they paid into.

After Senge helped the man up out of the corner and back onto his hay bale, he boiled up some black tea with no butter to see if the foreigner's stomach would at least hold liquid.

"Today Senge is last winter work day. Hard-hand daughter and hot rice wait in Manang. No more potatoes," Senge said. As the man tried sipping the tea without burning his cracked lips, Senge arranged his cooking and fixing tools onto his wool blankets then gently fingered some straw between the tool's edges so he could safely squeeze in his treasures. Each item that he pulled from a hiding place he demonstrated to the walker. The thumb-sized spoon with an insignia painted on the handle was given to him by a sunset-colored woman who used the spoon to eat her potatoes. Six man-bowls in only one night. She gave him the spoon in appreciation. The way she stayed up all night looking for food had convinced Senge that she was from a clan of musk deer people.

A man just one or two cycles short of being a wild boar

had given him this tube of white cream. Drooping watery eyes and a bristle haired jaw, he rooted around in his potatoes in a ferocious hurry, then he heaped up all his blankets and squirmed into bed with his partner as though he would nose her right onto the floor. Senge asked the sick man where a person should rub the cream but he didn't know; he just looked at the tube and jumped his shoulders up and down.

Senge finished packing his things, tied the blankets up into a tight square package and laced his harness through the knots. He perched himself in front of the stove to wait for the man to finish his tea before their descent.

The flames no longer jumped at the kettle like starving catfish, but slowly picked their way through the last unburned knots of wood. He would leave the last bit of wood in the bhaTTi even though the village below had so little. Here a person would die without wood; down below the yaks kept their houses warm. Getting impatient, Senge stacked the remaining branches into an orderly pyramid, and covered the potato pile with handfulls of buckwheat. Maybe the pile would disappear by next season. He gently pushed the pika down into his sweater then stood staring at the door in anticipation for their departure.

"So, you're going down. Not me. If you don't want to help a sick man then don't. You don't want some rupees, then go on with you." The man had untwisted himself from the sleeping bag and shuffled with a stooped head over to his pack. He fumbled with the shiny hooks and zippers, then

began yanking wet things out of his pack and onto the floor: a stiff ball of clothes, folded, wrinkled books, a strong smelling keroscene stove, a bag of leaking tubes of ointments, and a big-nosed camera. He roamed through the bag of tubes and found a silver tin, then threw the gluey bag back into the stuff pile near the door. After prying open the tin and swallowing down some pills, the man dragged his empty pack over to the hay bale and stuffed it with his sleeping bag and his camera. He yanked his sweaters and coat off the clothesline Senge had hung for him over the fire, then found his dry hat and mittens that Senge had balanced against the legs of the stove.

Senge set the pika down in the pile of things that had been dumped on the floor, and helped the hiker into his pack out of habit. Senge followed as the cramped man huffed out the door to find the way up. The valley was so heavy with clouds that the disoriented pink couldn't find which way was up. Senge vaguely pointed to the trailhead and watched as the chili red pack disappeared into the gray fog.

Senge sat on a wobbly, makeshift bench that faced the direction the man was supposedly going. Since the foreigner wouldn't be able to see through the fog to catch sight of the mountains, there would be little reward in the walk itself. Thorang La was a deceptively difficult climb, the mountain always offering the climber false passes. This man would lose track of time and feel he had been ascending for ages, when it would only be minutes. Not being able to see the

horizon, he would become dizzy as the path would seem to tilt sideways and curve into a hairball of intersections and twisted turns. The thin air and the sickness would force the walker to stop every fifteen steps, so every fifteen steps he would weaken from asking himself what he was doing. The roars of the avalanches that spew down the gullies would terrify him because he wouldn't see where they were through the fog.

There would be no point for Senge to go back to his village that day. He would have to wait at the hut in case the man was clever enough to come back down. Senge's yaks had always been clever. They of course didn't suffer mountain sickness or get panicked on sharp switchbacks, but when the winds blew the animals into a huddle and the snow packed under their brows till they could barely force open their eyes, the yaks used to stumble back, one by one, to his hut, where Senge would shove open the heavy door and shake his head the way mothers do when their children have stayed out in the cold too long without hats.

Waiting for yaks to return was respectable, but waiting for a foreign hiker was not. His Manangba ancestors would laugh till they got cream lung if they could see him waiting. Senge's grandfather used to walk past anyone who wasn't Manangba with his chin caught in the wind as though he had gotten his hair stuck in the back collar of his shirt. Why would you waste time talking to any non clan when you know that they only use their tongues to eat and lie? His

grandfather, even his father, would have been down the valley by now with all the hiker's gear stuffed in their canvas roll ups.

When he was a young man, Senge's clan of Manangba still bragged about being feared and hated. In those early days when Senge cared for the yaks from his hut, the only people who travelled through his valley were his own kin on their way to steal wool and salt from the more northerly tribes of Lopas, Dolpas and Thakalis. His relatives would sit at his fire and tell stories that he could understand, stories about the savage eating styles of the northern clans and the ugliness of their women's feet.

Now he barely understood anyone who sat on his hay bales. There were the northern barbarians who coughed through a funny dialect that always sounded like the frightening crashes of falling rock, and then there were the foreign hikers who didn't even seem to understand each other most of the time, some talking like tight-lipped rodents and others talking in yawns.

Senge pushed a rock onto a pile of ageing human excrement that someone had deposited next to his bench. He figured that the person must have used the armrest to support himself. The foreign males seemed to have such troubles finding the right position to empty themselves.

He squinted through the fog at all the rocks with pink, blue and yellow tissues melted over them. Western prayer flags is what he called the paper the westerners polished

their behinds with. The soggy flags surrounded his hut like needles surrounding a pine tree. No longer a reason to watch where he stepped. The smell was strong on foggy days such as this, and Senge longed for the days when the mild scent of yak dung circled his hut instead.

Around the middle of his life is when the smells began to change. The magic gadgets and nature fighting clothes of the pinks coming up from the south became the things that his children wanted to have, not the salt and wool from the north, so the Manangba began walking down the valley from Manang and not up. Soon his sons were dressing themselves in slippery shirts and pants with metal teeth to make peeing in the cold faster.

When his kin stopped going north, the northerners came south. But only the Lopas braved his clan's Kali Ghandaki valley. Everyone else's bowels went soft at the thought of travelling through Manangba territory, or worse yet, at climbing a pass where their ancestors' bodies lie twisted into funny angles underneath the avalanches of Thorang La.

The Lopas were different. In the year when the monsoons blew so hard that his door froze shut and he had to crawl out his window to get a break from his cooped up yaks, the Lopas arrived with the sounds of tin bells. Senge had watched them from the windowsill as they trotted easily down the boulder fields of Thorang La as though they were coming home. Their pony train spread out behind them many hands of fingers long, a train so well decorated that Senge was sure it must have

been stolen.

The men all wore long, dark cloaks and boots of animal skin that tied at their knees. Each wore their hair in a thick, black braid that swung around their hips as they laughed at Senge's hut. Their high, fur-trimmed hats made them look tall, and their daggers in silver scabbards that flashed at their hips made them look even taller. Each man had a turquoise stone dangling from their east facing earlobe. The hole in the man's ear who finally butted the door open was a fingernail long from carrying a rock the size of his nose.

Senge had said nothing as the leader kicked all the yaks out of his hut to make room for his men around the fire. The man stood contemptuously in front of Senge with his hands locked behind his hips and his crotch bravely open to a kick. He held his chin higher than a Manangba when he told Senge that they were not so crack-brained as to trade legal goods. Salt trade was for boys with changing voices. These Lopas traded shaligrams, sacred fossils born when the seas had covered the mountains.

When Senge asked who would be so careless to buy sacred sea prints and risk the revenge of the Fierce Red Spirit, the Lopa laughed so hard that steam surrounded his head. "A special clan will buy these," he had said. "A lunatic race with lots of rupees."

Members of that lunatic race began arriving at Senge's hut from the south that same season. It was these people

that he initially thought would make his life so worthless. They arrived with nothing to trade, and they crossed Thorang La only because they wanted to walk back down the Thak Khola valley on the other side of the pass. They asked for food and shook rupees onto the floor.

When Senge told his family about the rupees that he earned frying potatoes and cooking barley meal, the family sent the yaks into another valley with his nephew and sent pack mules up to Senge's hut piled high with more barley, potatoes and wood.

For nine seasons now he had been waking up to feed what his clan thought were foreign morons and to bow low to lawless Lopas. If it hadn't been for the pinks' animal ways, Senge would have been miserable. Fortunately he had discovered early on that the pinks had had few lives and were still more similar to animals than men. For all their fancy things, their souls were as light as the color of their skin. They were not to be feared or harassed like his family thought, but pitied and helped. Even if he had earned no rupees from his years with the foreigners, he was sure his work was pressing and worthy.

But now he was ready to be old. Today was not only the last day of the season, but of his duties to the village. The years of money he had brought to the village were enough that he would be able to say no to any petty task he didn't want to do, and the only thing the women would be able to do would be shake their heads and drop their babies on his lap

to go do it themselves.

With the rupee respect he had earned he could sit spinning a prayer wheel all day at the village water spout and watch the newly sprouted women wash their deep armpits and pink gums. Or maybe he would sit at his neighbor's new trading post and laugh at the foreigners buying pastey, white crackers for the price of a porter's salary. But most probably he would pack up some food and find his nephew in the valley of Tal where he would be sitting with his chin in his hand staring down the valley wishing that he could be a trader instead of a yak herder. He would point his nephew's chin in the right direction.

Senge walked back inside to make sure everything was ready for their descent, and almost stepped on his pika who was nosing around in the foreigner's belongings which were spread across the floor. Fewer things than most other foreigners carried, but more than Senge's family could use up in four generations. He left the door open for light despite the chill of the fog that drifted into the already damp insides. He began folding clothes and pressing books flat so everything would be easy to pack when the foreigner returned.

The shirts and sweater had a strong smell to them, not the smokey, wheat smell of Manang people, but more of a spoiled milk smell. A bit like his yaks. He poked his fingers into jars of cream and tubes of jellies. He found some stretchable second skin that he had seen hikers stick over wet shoe sores and he found small, black cases that

rattled with the sounds of western medicine. He stuffed it all back into a plastic bag and sealed the bag with a second skin.

Having stacked everything, Senge sat staring at the neat piles. A colored picture that peeked out from a book caught his attention, and he pinched the corner of the picture, carefully sliding it from the middle of the book pile.

The picture was obviously of the men in the traveller's clan, because they all looked pitifully alike. It took Senge a moment to recognize which of the bearded, hairy men his client was, but found him by the brown of his boots.

Senge looked at the picture in a way he never felt comfortable looking at the pinks when they were actually in front of him. He noticed that the hair on this clan's faces was a different color than the hair on their heads, and the whiskers grew all the way up their cheekbones. One had no eyebrows and another had brow hair that grew all the way across the bridge of his nose, but Senge could see that they were still related. Something in their lack of expression proved their kinship. This same lack of expression made Senge uncomfortably aware of this clan's similarity to yaks.

He first felt the familiarity of the foreigner by the way he had moved when he plodded up the scree valley the afternoon before. Although yaks are certainly more graceful than this man was, the man's swaying gait and swinging hair were familiar to Senge. He had put the thought out of his head as a sign of loneliness until the hiker prepared himself

to ascend the pass this morning. A moment before the man headed into the fog, he stopped with a tensed body to stare the mountain into submission even though he couldn't see it. Senge's yaks also did this, challenging mudslides and snowstorms as though they were rutting bulls.

The years of eating with, walking behind and sleeping next to the pinks had made him an expert on discovering their animal pasts, so he wondered now how he had neglected to recognize this yak-man. There he stood in the picture with his massive build and drooping head, high humped shoulders and short sturdy limbs--a yak in a man's body. Even his brow bones had that trusting, curious tilt to them.

Despite all these clues, Senge hadn't discovered that the man was his charge until it was too late. Had he known, Senge would have forced the man to stay down since everyone knows yaks can't think ahead. It was Senge's job to think for his yaks. Or if the man couldn't be kept down, Senge would have gone up with him like he did with his stubborn, wandering yaks. After all, that was his job.

Senge was snooping through the foreigner's other books in search of more pictures when the bells of a lead horse announced the arrival of a pony train. He pulled away the earflaps of his hat to hear how close they were, but the fat clouds suffocated the sounds. He heard only enough to know whose train it was, and he immediately suspected that the sick man had not made it. Since they first travelled the valley, the Lopas always lugged carcasses from the pass.

Senge scrambled to the door and jammed it closed with his shoulder. Squatting in the dark, listening to the foraging sounds of his pika, he wondered how his mind could have been so fogged in the day before to not have descended the moment he saw how slow the traveller had walked up the valley towards his shelter. And what deluding memory or dream had borrowed his brawny good sense that morning when he sent the yak man up Thorang La with death in his boots?

The bells grew louder and soon the thieving Lopas stormed through the jammed door of his hut, dragged in the body of the frozen hiker, and deposited it on the floor. The lead Lopa, who had only seemed to grow taller and louder over the years, ordered his fastest fingered men to search through the foreigner's piles of belongings on the floor and told the rest of the men to stay away from the warmth of the fire since they would be leaving immediately.

Senge wrapped his hands under the iced armpits of the body and pulled it onto the bed of hay bails. He wrapped the foreigner in his sleeping bag, a job made easier now that the body no longer had any boots. He pulled the bag's cord tight so only the swollen lips, the frog eyes and the pore wormed nose of the man poked out. He knelt next to the body and stared protectively at its hardened face.

"Come now baabu, you must give us this body that is such a burden to your last working days," the still young leader of the haranguing band of men said. "We will care for the body the way we would care for young rice."

Senge pulled at his sloppy brown earlobe and then touched the cold cheek of the dead man. Dog luck that these Lopa pony drivers had found the yak man's body on their way over the pass. Dog shit luck that they wanted to keep the body. The hiker would never become more than a pink without correct funeral ceremonies.

Senge stretched his back straight to feel the cramped muscles along his spine and rolled his head from shoulder to shoulder. The Gurka soldiers of Manang would laugh at him if he dragged the body down the valley, but to carry the body would take a full day. Maybe a moon's circle would have to pass before he could carry wood again after such a shoulder bending journey. The Lopa pirate knew Senge lived with an ageing neck.

"You would so charitably leave the body for me in Manang?" Senge asked in his most addled voice.

The leader laughed and explained that of course they would not leave the body in Manang, because they needed the body's protective powers all the way down the valley. But any lost brained cook should recognize his great luck at ridding himself of such a responsibility. Yakherders know what to do with dead yaks, not dead pinks.

Senge stared at their cracked-skin faces then glanced at their footwear, no longer the tie around the knee boots from the earlier years, but boots with pink laces and sparkling buckles. What the Lopa said was true. Senge's village would curse him for burdening their monks with what they saw as the

body of an undeserving money slob. Senge's back would itch for years after such a blunder.

"What gale attacks you that you need a dead man's protection?" Senge asked.

"No wind awaits us grandfather. We trade only Mustang handcrafts and wool this winter trip. And even if we had objects that travel better hidden, we would use no dead man's body to deceive our monarch's snitches. The rectum of a mule, yes, but not of a dead man."

Sure that the Lopa's tongue only formed sounds of lies, Senge rested his arm across the hard body in the bag and watched the other Lopas search the corners of his hut for hidden food. He felt his throat close at the sight of a wide-jawed Lopa squeezing the life out of the panicked, squirming pika. Senge moved to save the Lopa's mistaken dinner, but stopped at the sight of the animal's motionless, bulging eyes.

The leader watched his relative slit the pika from chin to anus and fold the meat from the skin as easily as if he were taking off his socks. The leader went on talking in his chopped, wet voice. "Dead men should not be treated like dead mules," he said. "It is only that we can move so much faster with a dead body. No sane soldier stops a funeral procession."

While the pika squeezer disembowelled the carcass and another Lopa rekindled the fire, a third man with gentle fingers stitched the pika skin back together with so fine a

needle that Senge only saw it when it caught the light from the stove's flames. No doubt the pika skin would make a fine smuggler's sack.

The leader in the frozen man's boots stepped over the body on the hay bails and sat alongside Senge. The man smelled stronger than the glands of an ox, and Senge marvelled at the viciousness of the leader's scent. He talked deep into Senge's ear in an impatient hiss. "What can a frozen man be worth to a potato cook when compared to the hidden profits of letting us take the corpse into the valley?"

Senge held the body like a lover and talked with his chin to his chest. "You throw the decision my shaky direction. Why stop to ask me at all when you could have hidden the body while passing my kitchen?"

"Have we ever neglected to stop here on our trips down the Kali Gandaki valley? Would you ever not ask if we had crossed paths with one of your pink men? And if we could have silenced the horse bells and snuck on past, would you not have been upset to find out from the valley kin that we had your pink body? Can you deny that you would have spouted tales about us to your Manangba Gurkas?"

Senge knew they were unafraid of his clan's soldiers, that the Lopa lied only because he had misguessed Senge's feelings for the slow-witted foreigners that ate at his hut. He knew they had stopped to ask him about the body only because they thought he'd be happy to have the body carted

off the pass. They had probably hoped he would sugar their names to his valley clans.

"My pink men? My pink body? You've forged a false marriage. They are only the hosts to this old parasite that stoops before you. Listen to my yolk-drowned lungs. Look at my cave called a stomach. You think I serve these pink men out of duty? I serve them because rupee-swallowing trains like yours use only my fire and steal my food. Firesitters don't pay well, but pinks do." Senge whispered back in a naked voice that he was sure sounded convincing.

"Then let us take the body, and we'll order your garlic-drowned potatoes from now on at your bhaTTi at the moraine of the glacier. I give you my word"

Senge fingered the crust around his nose. Potato customers for when his son took over next year; he'd have to make the Lopas swear on it. If they needed the body badly enough, they would take it whether Senge dissaproved or not. If he dissaproved without good reason, the Lopas might harrass his son for the next twenty seasons up here. And they would probably steal the body anyways.

"Why aren't you afraid of what will happen with the body of an unspent spirit?

"Oh baabu, let me ask you. What do the pinks do in respect of Thorang La when they are on top of the pass? Do they stack rocks on his cairns? Do they tie prayer flags to our stupas? No. And when they visit your village, do they pass the the prayer walls in respect? Do they leave

donations in your monasteries? Of course not. So why should you worry over what happens to the shell of a skeptic?"

Senge glanced at the dead man's pile of belongings where some of the Lopas were still arguing over the messy tubes of ointments and stuffing them into their pockets. He turned his attention to the wiry eyebrows of the body, running his thumbnail through them the way he did with his yaks.

The Lopa leader pushed Senge's hand from the face and stared into Senge's eyes. "Have you so much money that you don't need our offer of business? Could it be that you are rich from these pass crossers? Should we lighten your load before you head back to your village?"

Weasle spirits protected these Lopas. He suspected their love of blood that first day he had seen them moving down off the rocks with the flowing movements of long, bodied rodents, slipping through boulders like rain water. A king's army, a valley of Manangba Gurkas, a pass that every mountain village in the world had lost a member to--the Lopas were ready to take on anyone or anything. A frail potatoe cook confronted with the meat eaters of the mountains. Now he might lose a year's earnings for the sake of a dead outsider? Why test an ancient like this?

In Manang his family spoke his name with respect, sure that he had kept with the old ways, treating foreigners like the deep pockets that they are. The sly yak herder that had a way with the foreign valley walkers, the old man who would come home from his bhaTTi with gifts for his family. What

they didn't realize was that he was still just a caretaker. He had piles of rupees because he knew the importance of treating the foreigners like the animals that they were. It was only yesterday when he forgetfully treated the foreigner like a foreigner.

And now the weasles wanted his yak man. He stared at the body's thawing nose and remembered the rancid yak carcass that this very group had found on the pass the summer before. They made their oldest, knock-kneed horse haul the rotting mess half way down the valley. Senge's Khudi brother from the foothills had told him that the Lopa's had finally cast the fetid carcass next to the village prayer wheels once it lost its usefulness; the smuggled sacred fossils had begun dropping along the trail through the decaying hide.

He wasn't sure exactly how to deal with the body if he kept it, but it was at least deserving of a funeral worthy of a yak. That was assuming that the Lopas didn't beat him and take the body anyways. If that happened he would have to build a bar for the door so his son could find sleep in the hut during the future seasons. His son was afraid of these Lopas.

Having pocketed and packed away all of the foreigner's belongings, the Lopas waited away from the fire for their leader to signal their departure. Senge pulled at a string on his sleeve, buying time with postures of senility.

If he gave them everything he made that season, maybe they would leave the body with him. His daughter would lock

him up when she found out that he had given away his savings for a dead body that no one knew how to safely get rid of. But if he let them take the body, what had he been doing for nine seasons?

He began to unwrap his blanket of belongings. He pulled out the little spoon and ran his finger across the design. Then he tried the lid to his legally acquired tube of cream and cleaned out the neck of the tube with his shirt tail. Finally he unfolded the rupees he had earned from his trips up the pass and set them out under his gifts. He looked up at the Lopa lead weasle, and sat on the body.

"This is my job. Take what you want and leave the body with me." And he picked up a new log to feed the fire.

Cooking Troubles
by Karyn Sandstrom

Four days ago my dad shot a big horned sheep. He shot it by the side of the road 15 minutes before dark on the last day of hunting season. We almost ran into it with our Plymouth station wagon. The sheep, which I keep mistaking for a goat, stood chewing muddy, road-side weeds while Dad peaked through the sighting scope from different angles. My fiancée, who doesn't know much about hunting either, elbowed dad and said, "You're not taking a picture Tom, shoot it."

That made my dad a little nervous so he accidentally shot its stub tail and blew off one of its legs before he finally killed it by perching the gun on the hood of the car for better aim. We all felt sad for the sheep, but then Ralph began ordering us around so we wouldn't have time to get too upset. He told me to just get back in the car.

Whenever I feel real bad about the way things are going, I get busy doing something else to take my mind away for the time being. So I sat in the front seat and yanked at some stray eyebrows while Dad and Ralph dragged the sheep across the knapweed and rolled it onto Mom's beach towel that she had left under the back seat since August. It made a sort of sheep hammock.

Once they had lifted the sheep onto the roof of the car they realized we had nothing to tie it to the luggage rack with, so they folded down the back seat and rolled the sheep over the tailgate into the car.

It's not like I haven't seen fresh killed animals before, my father is an insurance agent and has the policy for Superior Meats in town, but to have the sheep ride in the car with us made things different. My eyes and nose watered each time the weight of the sheep bounced the car and made me tweezer out too many hairs on the bridge of my nose. I held the Kleenex box on my lap and peeked through the rear view mirror at the bloody Coppertone towell as we drove home with the windows open.

My fiancée eats breakfast with us. He is our tenant, and that is how I met him. Every morning since he moved into the attic I have gotten woken up by Ralph doing his Special Forces push-up routine. We are going to get married in three months and sixteen days. He is an introvert and I am an extrovert. Those kinds of marriages are supposed to work.

When he isn't working at St. Thomas Aquinas, a resort for people who are sick in the head, Ralph spends all his time in his truck, driving up and down street blocks that look like they might have rentals. He's been driving around now for five weeks looking for the right place for us, but I think he's about ready to start looking in the classifieds. He wants the kind of place that you can't find in the paper.

At breakfast I squish the oatmeal to the sides of my bowl and watch Ralph's socks slide along the bathroom door as he presses up and down from a headstand to a handstand. A vein squiggles down his temple, and his whole face pulsates with his heartbeat. He kicks his feet off the door and begins his one armed, fingertip pushups. He is so strong.

I am looking at chapter 10 of the Better Homes and Gardens cook book to figure out what to do with the sheep that is hanging up from the automatic garage door opener dripping blood on the newspapers. I don't know why my father put down newspapers since there's already oil stains all over the garage.

At the beginning of the meat chapter is a sparse diagram that is shaped like Virginia. The diagram is divided into 9 sections and labeled things like: chuck eye roast, corned boneless brisket, scored flank steak. It's the only section in the whole book where the working hands are men's hands. Whisping, sauteing, kneeding and basting all are done with manicured, women's hands. Cutting is a man's job. Up until four days ago it was my job.

"Will you sit on my back?" Ralph asks from his knees. He spits on his palms and rubs them together for traction.

I carry over the red and white gingham book and sit on his rear end. "I'm feeling strong today. Could you sit a little higher?"

At the sink my mother is saving bacon fat in a Minute Made container. She has a special funnel for grease that she saves under the sink and never washes. Yesterday I noticed that the funnel makes the dirty wash rags in the cupboard smell like dead animals.

I cross my legs and balance between my fiancée's shoulder blades. He grunts up and down, and I notice his wrists look like rolled flank steaks. My mother makes a face at his noises, then reminds him his breakfast is getting cold.

He stops his routine and washes his hands before he sits down at the kitchen counter. When she sets his breakfast down in front of him he says, "thank you Mrs. Bjornstrand." He is one of the only people I have ever met who calls her that since Mary is so much easier to say. She smiles when he says her name, and says, "of course Ralph." They are both morning people.

She takes my bowl of hardening oats to the sink and shakes her head. That's three breakfasts in three days that went down the garbage disposal. I keep telling her I'm not hungry.

At Community Hospital, that's where I work, the nutritionist asks me when I'm going to be able to cook entrees again. The subchef is running out of ideas. It has only been three days I remind her, and I give her a list of all the things I've been doing instead of cooking so she won't fire me yet.

I was lucky to find a job in Missoula so quickly. A nine-fingered nun named Ora Belle cooked graveyard shift at the 4-Bs for two years before she got a daytime shift, and she's even related to the mayor.

Hospital cooking isn't real imaginative. You decide what kind of meat you're serving, then you look at the nutritionist's vegetable and starch chart to see what can go with the meat. I have always been the kind of person who thinks about texture and color when I make my choices, not just flavor. People in hospitals have more time to appreciate that kind of thoughtfulness. But my real wish is that I could bake instead of cook. Coconut Diamonds, Nutmeg Feather Cake, Snow-Capped Lemon Rolls, Pecan Tassies--baking is so cultivated, so kind.

"Honey," my dad says that evening from the cellar. He is shoving an ancient space heater into the bedrock under the house where the water pipes are. Last year the pipes froze because he couldn't get the heater far enough into the hole in the wall, so this year he is using Ralph's hockey stick to shove it in. "How was work?" he asks from the hole in the

wall.

I climb down into the slippery basement and sit on a shelf next to my dad's chainsaw. I can see him inside the wall where the light glistens off the green of his eyes. He blinks to stop himself from asking any more questions.

"Work is okay."

He crawls backwards out of the hole in the wall and steps underneath the lightbulb that dangles from the ceiling. "You know, I had lunch at the funniest smelling restaurant today." He tried to sound like the observation had just occurred to him while struggling under the house with the heater. Dad is afraid I might lose my job and have to cook in a diner. He paid half my tuition to La Cuisine, a cooking school in Cincinnati that provides its students with one hundred ways to use cream of mushroom soup. He thinks La Cuisine is one of the best, and I don't tell him otherwise. What I know is enough.

"I've still got my job." I chew on my cuticles and try not to look intense. He thinks I over-react, that I'm too emotional even for a woman.

I look at his dry fingers wrapped around the taped end of the hockey stick and imagine them dragging the sheep by the horns. "Mary," he had called to my mom that cold night from the driveway. "Look what your hunter brought home for you." Mom had come out in her terry robe and flip flops, rubbed her fingers over the long nose and cupped one of the three remaining feet in her other hand. "Oh Tom, it's

lovely."

Dad crawls back into the hole, connects the heater up to an extension cord, and crawls backwards into the basement. He plugs in the cord and smiles at the sound of the whirring motor. "So," he says "when are we gonna get to eat sheep steaks?"

He hasn't really put this whole thing together yet. Not only has he set out his work bench and saws for me in the garage, but he thinks I'm going to freeze half of the sheep so we can serve it at my wedding reception. I know I'm his favorite daughter, and not just because I'm the youngest, but he hardly even knows me. He can't even remember my middle name.

My mother is on her knees in front of the television set with pins in her mouth. She is pinning tissue paper onto the evergreen velvet that my bridesmaids are going to wear. I picked a pattern that would make even my oldest sister, who has just had her fifth baby and now shops in the women's section, look slim and elegant. It is important that everyone feels beautiful at weddings, not just the bride.

"What's for dinner?"

She sits back on her heels and jams the pins into her strawberry shaped pin cushion with her tongue. "Shoot, honey. If you're hungry I'll go whip something up right now."

"Well, weren't you going to eat?"

"Daddy is taking me out for dinner, and Ralph was going to stop somewhere on his way home from Aquinas. But if I'd known you were going to eat.."

"No, no. I'm not hungry." I really was hungry, but I couldn't eat. "Really, I was only wondering."

"Let's you and me go take a walk to Taggart's for a sundae, just the two of us." Mom and me love walking together at night under the streetlamps. We live in a good neighborhood.

"Thanks Mom, but you really shouldn't spoil your appetite," I say and scuff across the well-swept dining room floor into the kitchen.

Mom follows me in and pulls the kitchen stool over to the breakfast table where I'm looking through the desert section of my cookbook. She takes my hands in her lap and warms them in her skirt. "What is it honey? Tell your mother."

I'm embarrassed that she doesn't know, but I like the feel of my elbows on her soft knees, so I put my head in her lap.

"Won't you just eat a little something? You'll never fit into my dress with your figure, honey."

I think mothers and physicians overemphasize the importance of eating. Nothing makes me sick faster than forced food. Especially when I have something on my mind.

I am waiting for Ralph in the day room so we can go out

to the Mall and get him a bite to eat. He is an orderly on the floor that takes care of people who want to kill themselves. The other orderlies all read the obituaries daily to see which of their patients succeeded in killing themselves after being released, but Ralph will only read the sports page and the Home Improvement section. Ralph almost lost his job last month when he beat up another orderly in the prescription room who was taking bets on how long an anorexic divorcee named Ginine would make it.

I am studying the pictures that they have in the Poultry chapter of my old La Cuisine cookbook with Ginine. Poultry is almost always grouped with fish and eggs. These seem to be the in between dishes, not really plants and not really animals. Even vegetarians that I have talked to don't really think of chickens as having feelings. Something in the smallness of their heads or the painful looking way that chickens walk make them seem like they really wouldn't mind being dead.

When you ask a person what he thinks about chicken, he'll probably say something like, "oh, I like mine with dumplings," or "a la King please," or "Cacciatore like my mother cooks it." Unless you ask a kid on a farm, the only answers you seem to get refer to dead chickens. At least other animals are called something different once they become dinner, pigs become pork, cows become beef, but chickens are like brocolli. It's brocolli before it's cut and after it's cut.

Ginine is sitting next to me peeling a pear with a butter knife that the head nurse told her she could use so long as she stayed in the day room. She is explaining to me how to thaw a chicken in a brown paper bag. While she explains how to wrap the chicken in newspaper, a new patient sits down across from us in the day room and asks Ginine why she tried to kill herself. Suicidal people can even recognize each other in street clothes.

They begin comparing symptoms and medications. The new patient says she would have been dead by now if her son had filled up the car with gas like she had told him to. He never does what she asks. No one has to ask Ginine how she tries to kill herself. Her arms look like crab meat, like she tried to cut herself with a plastic picnic fork. When the nurse brings their dinners to them they both reach for their tray cup of roast beef. I want to ask them whether the hospital food makes them sick, but I don't want to bother them with my problems.

On page 285 of the Poultry, Fish and Eggs section of my cook book, I look over the six-step procedure for cutting up a chicken. I've cut up at least a thousand chickens before, but it's only now that I notice how similar their legs are to ours. It's really true that the only big difference is that they walk in a squat instead of stretching up to their full height. All this time, and I'm only now starting to understand chickens.

Ralph isn't happy about the housing situation in Missoula. What he is most disappointed with are the kitchens. He knows how important kitchens are for holding a family together. Food and love are real close for him.

At the mall we wander past the stores to build Ralph's appetite. He's the only man I know who likes looking at baby stuff. He is always thinking of inventions for kids, like socks with rubber knobs on the bottoms for traction. Most of the inventions have already been made though, and we find them in the mall.

"Ever heard of a vegetarian baby?" I ask Ralph while we wait with a number on our table for his sandwiches.

"No, they die before you hear about them," he says to me, and rubs his eyes. He has been looking at lots of small print in the rental section of the newspaper.

"The subchef told my supervisor I wasn't cooking. The supervisor told me not to come in tomorrow if I wasn't going to cook," I say when the hoagies and the fries arrive. I sip on water and watch Ralph eat his dinner. They are the kind of sandwiches that he doesn't need to chew much before swallowing. I don't think he really likes eating at the mall.

He wipes his hands and his mouth off in a thinking way, crumbles up the packaging and sets the tray on the floor. He takes my fingers and holds them in his strong hands. "When is all this going to go away?" he asks me, and brushes his thumb across my engagement band.

I really can't say since I don't know. "I sure would like to go to the pet shop and get a gerbil," is all I can think of to say. I named the gerbil Pete.

Today I need to cook at the hospital or else I won't be cooking there anymore. Everyone has already left the house for the day and I am getting ready to go by ironing my apron, collecting my new recipe cards that I clipped from the casarole section of my cookbook, and glancing out the back door that connects to the garage. There, dangling in the dark, is the shadow of an upside down, headless sheep. My father sent the head to a taxidermist.

No one has been able to park in the garage for five days, and the smell keeps reminding the family that I haven't done my job yet. My father left the door open to remind me, and it is working. When I am ready to leave for work, I think that I am going to zip right through the garage and out the side door, but as it turns out I linger near the three legged, suspended animal. It stopped dripping two days ago, and the skin is beginning to fold into the wounds like the skin around an old bite of an apple.

I have never cut into anything bigger than a pot roast. Even when we were in cooking school all of the meat came to us in white-wrapped packages that were clearly labelled. The idea of having to start with the animal itself seems perverted. I am sure that I have to take the fur off first since the map of the cow in the cookbook had no hide on it,

but nowhere in the book are directions on how to skin an animal.

The bus will arrive for work any moment, but I pick up my father's Bowie knife from his workbench anyways. I start on the remaining foreleg since it seems like the least animal-like part of the sheep, but I don't make it far because it turns out that the skin is not like chicken skin that peels off. Instead the skin is attached tightly to the leg with tissue that looks like chewed, stuck gum. By the time I discover this, the bus has already gone, and I am going to be late for work.

I find a sturdy looking hand saw on my father's workbench and grab hold of the sheep's ankle with my other hand. If I can remove the leg from the sheep then I can feel better about working on a familiar part. I am not sure where exactly I should cut, so I rotate the leg to see how the leg connects to the body. It is easy to cut through the hide and the muscle, but each time I move the saw to try to cut through the bone, the sheep starts swinging. I lose my grip for a moment and the momentum of the sheep triggers the garage door opener. The sheep levitates to the top of the garage and jams the garage door at the half-way mark.

After all this I decide it would probably be easier to use a chain saw, so I go into the basement to fetch it. When I'm deep under the stairwell, the phone starts ringing and I know it's the hospital wondering where I am. It's probably just as well that I couldn't answer it.

Starting my father's chainsaw is a lot like starting a lawnmower with no gas. Once I get it going I reach up to place the saw in the area where I think the joint is, but all that happens is that the saw kicks back on impact and the sheep swings away from the saw and triggers the garage door opener again. The garage door closes and it's dark again. When I realize my father has taken the blade of the rotational device, I decide that I've had enough. The sheep is still swinging and the foreleg looks like Ginine's forearms. I am so glad that I haven't eaten anything in five days.

Our next door neighbor teaches ballroom dancing in the evenings at the community college. She is my age but already has a husband, a house, three kids and a family sized station wagon. When I ring her doorbell I can hear a needle scrape across a phonograph and footsteps that sound like an army of nutcrackers. Windy has a gold lame rose bob pinned over her right ear and silver dust eyeshadow on her lids. I can see that I've interrupted because her three girls standing behind the screen are wearing tap shoes and fish net tutus.

"Can you drive me to Superior Meats. It's an emergency." Windy is the kind of neighbor that wishes someone would ask her a favor everyday, and she sends all her girls to get on their snow pants. I tell her she'll need to back the car into the driveway.

The girls tuck their tutus into their jackets to help

lift the sheep into the wagon, and one of them asks to ride with it in the back. Windy thinks that's fine, so the rest of us squeeze into the front seat.

Windy brought her telephone book to find Superior Meats, and she found time to pack Graham crackers and grape juice for the girls. She points to my clothes and says she doesn't mind waiting if I want to change. I look at the blood on my sleeves and realize that I never could have thought of any of these things. There are so many things that I need to learn before I become a mother, and here I am like a backed up sink just trying to keep up.

The girls all have purple mustaches by the time I return and Windy has put on fresh coral orange lipstick. She asks if I want a half of a piece of gum, and tears a stick of Wrigleys exactly in two.

At Superior Meats Windy's daughter pushes the sheep out the back of the car with her feet while two smiling men in aprons pull it out. Windy tells her daughter to cut it out or she'll get blood in her taps. I tell Windy that I'll be right back and I follow the sheep into the noisy warehouse. The men point me to a glassed in office where I am supposed to fill in some papers, and I find myself at a counter that looks out the window at a chute of pigs.

The pigs are standing snout to tail on a conveyor belt, long as a full sized grocery aisle. They're gliding into the warehouse from a door that must attach to a pen or a truck. The pigs are biting eachother's tails, bumping into the walls

and squealing loud enough for me to hear them from behind the glass. The conveyor belt stops at a platform right in front of me where a man with a mask stands with a two pronged hay fork that is attached to a portable generator with a bungy cord. He zaps a pig behind the ears and the pig's face vibrates and its eyes roll back into its head.

I fill in my address and I omit my work number. Windy is probably wondering what is taking me so long, so I leave my forms on the desk and run out as they string the pig up by its back feet.

On our way home Windy asks me if I still work at Community Hospital and I realize that I never called in sick. But I'm not surprised when I hear myself tell her that I'm looking for a new job. She's glad to hear that I don't have to go back to work because she wanted to go to the mall with me anyways. We spend the rest of the afternoon choosing dishes for my bridal registry and picking out color combinations for my bathroom. When the girls each get a hotdog for snack, I realize that I'm not being honest with Windy. The way things are going, I'm not sure if there will be a wedding.

My fiancée used to eat at the Mo Club every night before he met me. He's begun to eat there again since I stopped cooking. He talks to Matt, the linebacker bartender who once straight-pressed my best friend over his head in one jerk. He held her there, wobbling on level with the black and white

pictures of the town's old greats until she promised to go out with him. Matt serves Ralph double burgers with pepper cheese.

Matt points his finger at me from behind the bar as I walk in. "Ralph tells me that the sheep is still stinking up your family's garage." He is a real hunter. Once he even told Ralph that some things are so beautiful that you just have to shoot them. It proves my point that men don't always know the best ways to express their feelings for things.

Ralph laughs at Matt and says, "Ah shut up," in just the right voice to not get clobbered. Ralph pats the empty stool next to him and helps me take off my scarf.

I found out that the bill for Superior meats is more than I make in three day's work. That's on top of me not making any more day's paychecks, so it's even more expensive. I decided on the way home from the mall to be right up front with Ralph about the whole thing. Marriages are like dental hygiene; what you do from the beginning is what you'll live with for the rest of your life. No use starting a family on lies.

"I took the sheep to the meat packageing plant today and I lost my job." I shake my head at the pink patty resting in Matt's palm for my okay. He tosses it back into the beer cooler next to the mayonaise and shrugs his not very flexible shoulders.

"You don't have a job anymore?" Ralph asks me. Not in a really fact-finding voice, but the kind that would go along

with turning on the bedroom light if I would have said it in the dark.

"No. I just can't cook meat anymore." I look right in his eyes to see the whole truth. He almost doesn't blink for a full minute, which is unusual for a person who wears hard contact lenses.

"You know," Ralph says, "I had an Uncle Norm who divorced my Aunt Missy when she quit smoking." He turns to Matt and says seriously, "It was one of the most important things they did together."

"I don't know about you, Ralph," says Matt, "but I get the shakes if I don't eat red meat at least twice a day." He bites his thumbnail and spits it out. The grill sizzles. Matt doesn't believe in the two-vote marriage system.

"They don't eat meat in China, and look how healthy they are. They have a bigger population than anywhere." I pull out my new book from my bag and set it on the bar in front of Ralph and me. "Besides, I bought a cookbook of recipes at the mall that don't take any meat."

"Yeah, but no one can live on deserts," Matt says. He leans across the bar and pulls my new book towards him through the beer rings. "Sweet and Sour Mung Beans, Tofu Spring Rolls, sounds great."

I'm pretty traditional in most ways, and I know Ralph is thinking that maybe I'm forgetting who I am. The only vegetarians that he knows are hippies and big city people.

"The Chinese are still Communists aren't they?" he asks Matt.

I notice that Ralph has the rental section of the newspaper in front of him. He has circled some of the listings, and I try to imagine what the houses must look like. "A house with a garden is the best kind of house for people who don't eat meat."

"You're not going to stop cooking meat altogether though. What will we eat at Christmas?" Ralph looks at me as though he is reconsidering the last two years of his life.

I cross my hands and try my best to look perky and confident. "Do you know that you can cook food that makes people think they are eating meat?"

"Like these Tamari Soy Bean Burgers," Matt says and point to a recipe. "I bet nobody would know if I slipped them one."

"You're going to make burgers out of soy beans?" Ralph asks. "Didn't Mc Donalds get sued for that?"

"You know, it's not just your food she's talking about," Matt says, "it's your freedom. Your right to eat whatever you want."

"You don't want me to eat meat either?" Ralph asks me, and drops his arm from my shoulders to see me in the face. This is a crucial moment. Ralph is not looking at me with the eyes of a loving future husband, but with with the eyes that a resentfull man turns onto his bossy mother. He just doesn't see things like I do. He's been to Superior. He sees the sheep everyday. But he's not the same.

I recently wrote down a list of what I wanted to

accomplish in the next five years, and almost everything required that I get married first. Without Ralph I might have to put off the next five year plan indefinitely. But I'll tell anyone who wants to listen, that a good husband is more than a good breadwinner. I've told Ralph many times that I don't want just a provider. I want what they call a maximum involvement marriage, or none at all. After all, people don't have to get married anymore. It's not like we're a tribe or something.

"I just won't cook it, that's all. I plan on cooking lots of other things." His shoulders drop lower than I ever imagined that shoulders like his could. What can you say to a man whose shoulders are so low?

"Cooking meat is really a man's job anyways," I say. "Don't you think so Matt?" I just can't believe that I said that. But I've also been known to slide out the back door when the Jehova's Witnesses come around, even though I know they'll be back.

Matt tosses his metal spatula from hand to hand then flips a burger high in the air and catches it on a fried bun. He sets the plate on the bar and slides it down to a man at the end of the bar who is watching the women's beach volleyball. The plate stops at the man's hand.

"Yeah," Matt says, "I can see where you would think that. Meat really is a man's job."

Ralph takes a bite of his burger and wipes his mouth with a napkin. He looks at me with the deepest kind of look

that a man can give a woman. I raise my eyebrows so innocently that my hairline aches, and ask if he would please order me a toasted cheese sandwich.

I guess it's that practical, female side of me that finally came back. That side that separates Windy from Ginine. I sit close to Ralph, who begins reading the circled addresses out loud to Matt. Matt rates the neighborhoods on a scale of one to ten depending on whether there is a convenience store in the neighborhood and whether you need to keep a gun for protection. I'm watching Matt try to grill his first cheese sandwich while I sip on my Irish Coffee and lick at the whip cream. I don't know how long these animals are going to bother me, but I'm sure things will be easier once I'm married. Right now, sitting next to my fiancée who is looking for our home, things feel light, like an old magazine advertisement. People walk down the sidewalk outside and look into the Mo Club's bright window as they pass. We're part of a picture that makes strollers decide to step in for a warmer upper.

Bison Kill

Nick could tell that the game warden liked Wayno better than Lennart. The warden had the same eyes, the same clothes, and the same tilt to his hips that Wayno did. And this warden thought that the best way to kill a buffalo was to aim for the neck, just like Wayno thought.

"Second best is dropping it with a brain shot, but sometimes it'll wreck the part you're gonna put on the wall," said the warden.

Wayno looked out across the small meadow of trapped bison and nodded. "Put that bullet where the neck joins the shoulder. That'll drop him."

Nick nodded at his mother's boyfriend and the warden and glanced back at his grandfather. Lennart had been polishing the same apple since the three of them had pulled the truck down Highway 89 that led to the meadow where the Yellowstone River broke from the mouth of Yankee Jim Canyon. At least Lennart had stopped muttering about what a crime it was to shoot a bison using someone else's permit.

Two days earlier Wayno had received a letter from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks that offered him the chance of a lifetime, a tag to shoot one of the buffalo that had wandered across the borders of Yellowstone and into Montana. He had passed that two hundred dollar chance onto Nick in hopes that he would man-up a bit. That's what he said.

Nick knew what his mother's new live-in boyfriend

thought of him. He'd heard Wayno argue in the kitchen with Lennart where the two men drank coffee every morning at the jelly-stained counter and read different newspapers. Even though Nick was only 14, Wayno could already see that Nick would only go where there was room and would only work to eat. Nick needed a boot kick if you wanted to know Wayno's opinion.

Nick's grandfather, however, would tell anyone who would listen, which wasn't many, that his grandson was T.V. perfect. He had his three favorite stories about Nick at different ages that he told exactly the same way no matter what company he was in. The stories were supposed to tell it all. Nick and Wayno knew that it wasn't the illegality of the permit exchange that bothered Lennart. He plain didn't want his grandson to shoot a buffalo. A legend about shooting a trapped buffalo would scuttle Lennart's stories like a moldy bread butt contaminates a loaf.

But no one had asked Lennart. He had climbed into the pickup truck that morning with his ears alert for any opening to inject opinions into the air. So Wayno's telling Nick's mother that the three of them were off for a hike into a winter fishing hole set Lennart into a thirty mile lecture on the sin of white lies. Already by Ronan Wayno had opened a beer to calm his ears.

"That's a gun that'll do good duty," the warden said. "No chance you'll miss entirely unless you've never shot before. Ever been gopher schmucking?"

Nick shifted his weight from heel to heel the way Wayno and the warden did, hands deep in his jean's pockets, and changed the subject. "So you wardens shot all the bison yourselves last year."

"That's right, and it was a lot of work," the warden said. Nick liked the way the warden didn't use his mouth when he talked, as if his words came from nowhere. "This year we're even making money off culling the buffalo that need worked on. Everyone's happy."

A shot echoed off the canyon walls of the nearby drainage and a buffalo near a patch of juniper toppled as its knees were shot. Nick watched the animal try to stand back up with its bony forelegs, but it tipped towards its injuries. After a moment of dancing, the other animals found their previous positions, and their necks returned to various angles of eating.

"Hunters hold your fire," the warden said through his bullhorn. "Hold your fire."

All the radios were turned down in the jeeps, landrovers and pickups that were arranged in a semicircle around the herd of buffalo, and the conversations stopped. Nick raised his new binoculars like everyone else to measure the head size of the wounded buffalo and to watch for the second shot. A young woman with a camouflaged rifle walked across the trampled meadow until she was within spitting distance of the buffalo and shot the animal in the heart. Behind her three men from her party drove a flatbed across the rutted grazing

area, stopped next to the woman, who was stroking the flanks of the dead animal, and loaded the animal onto the back of the truck.

"I think she had an Uncle Mike's Trebark Camo Sling on that rifle," the warden said as the four drove off the meadow. "They're new on the market."

"Looks like everyone is happy to me," called Lennart. "Too bad your mom couldn't be here to join in on all this happiness." Nick looked back at his grandfather who rested on the tailgate of the pickup truck smoking a skinny cigarillo in between bites of what must have been his fifth or sixth apple. He chewed it like a pulp mill as though the fruit might escape his teeth. "My grandson doesn't even talk to people who schmuck gophers. Isn't that right, Nick."

Nick rubbed his forefinger over the few whiskers that grew from the tip of his chin and turned back to face the warden. "Actually, I only got a gun yesterday. But I cooked a dead squirrel before. I found the recipe in a magazine."

Lennart walked over to Nick in a slow, bobbing way, like a rubber raft on a choppy river. The wind blew the strand of hair that normally lay across his bald spot straight up like an antenna from his left ear, and Nick wished his grandfather had worn a hat in front of the warden.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I hiked to the top of St. Joseph's Peak with a wood burning stove on my back for the fire lookout?" Lennart asked. A fly buzzed around Lennart's head and got caught inside his glasses. "More than

6000 feet in only nine hours, all 89 pounds of it," he said, ignoring the fly by closing his eye.

Nick watched the magnified fly bounce against the glass of his grandfather's spectacles and waited for the old man to let the fly out. "There's a ridge worth climbing just one drainage south of here," Lennart said. He dropped his head forward to let the glasses slide down his nose to release the fly, then jerked his head backwards to tip the glasses back to the bridge of his nose. "What do you say we leave Wayno to the shooting, and you and I go climb that ridge,"

Wayno had stepped in closer to hear better. When Lennart finished, Wayno took off his hat and picked at the rim before offering it to Lennart. The hat balanced like a plate on top of the old man's head.

"Nick is no hiker," Wayno said. "Look at his hands. He's a hunter." Everyone looked at Nick's hands which were scarred, scratched and discolored. The scars were from a fall he had taken into an imitation volcano at a miniature golf palace when he went to visit his real father in Las Vegas, and the scratches were from the neighbor's cat who followed Nick to school like a loyal dog. The discoloration was just bad circulation, inherited from his mother.

But Nick saw his hands the way he thought Wayno and the warden saw his hands. Working hands. Not the puffy fingers of an old man whose rheumatism kept him from wearing clothes with buttons. Nick looked at Lennart's shiny, smooth hands. Bald hands that looked like they had been through

chemotherapy. Ones that held a walking stick but didn't pull triggers.

Wayno followed Nick's stare and said, "even if you screw it up, it's better to be bad at what you're supposed to do than to be good at something else."

"Bad like you are at tracking things that you've wounded, is that what you mean?" Lennart asked Wayno. Nick walked away from his relatives and pretended to choose a buffalo for himself. He couldn't believe his grandfather had brought that old rumor up again. Especially in front of the warden.

"I searched for that whitetail for seven hours," Wayno said.

"In the days when I still hunted I tracked a bear for four days. Never gave it a three hour head start either," Lennart said. "I don't suppose my daughter knows that story about you."

Wayno shoved his head close to Lennart's with his long neck, and took back his hat. "I was letting him stiffen up. Ask the warden. It's standard procedure to give them a few hours." The two turned to the warden, but he wasn't listening to the family any more.

A shot rang out from the back of a pickup truck and Nick saw a cow get sent off the ground, flipping through the air backwards.

"Hunters hold your fire," the warden called, and again everyone became still behind their binoculars.

"Hunters hold your fire," the warden called, and again everyone became still behind their binoculars.

Lennart pulled up the fronts of his trousers so the cotton wouldn't cut into his legs and sat down on the fender of the pickup truck. "You know Nick, in Elmo I was the first man to swim the bay each spring. Wayno was only a kid then."

Nick looked at Wayno, who was rubbing his forearm across his head like a cat cleaning its ears. His black and silver hair stood like thistles against the wind. He turned to Nick and said, "any animal so dumb as will stand there to let you shoot at it aught to be shot."

"Everyone worried that my larynx would snap shut, but I was fine," Lennart said.

"Once you kill a real animal, women never see you with the same eyes." Wayno said and scanned the buffalo through his binoculars. "Over there," he said to the warden, "can Nick try for that bull standing near the calf?"

The warden searched across the field and found the bull Wayno had pointed out. "Sure. He looks like he could stop a .458."

Nick put his hunter's hands in his pockets and jingled his change. He looked out at the herd and found the animal Wayno had picked out. It was licking its foreleg with its slow, brown tongue. His grandfather had been right when he told him that shooting a buffalo wouldn't be much different from shooting the rotted out refrigerator in the alley from their back porch. But still, the warden had said that the

buffalo were dangerous with their crazed horns and their monster necks. And if it weren't for the hunters, all the cattle in Montana might get a bison disease. Wayno thought Montana needed people like Nick.

"Well son," Wayno said as he backed towards the truck to get out of the way, "I wish I had had this opportunity when I was your age. Squeeze off a shot and score. Make your mom proud of you."

"I'll tell you what made his mom proud," Lennart said, and stepped in close to Nick, "was when I sold my gun to Joe's Seconds six years ago."

"That's maybe what she told you, but look who she's thinking of marrying," Wayno said. "Now give the boy some room."

Lennart wiped his forefinger and thumb across the corners of his mouth and looked back and forth between Nick and the bison. "You want to kill that animal?" he said from behind his hand.

"He wants to kill it, now back off. The warden is tired of waiting."

Lennart chewed on his lower lip and hooked his thumbs into his beltloops as if he were going to say something else, but then walked back to the fender to watch with Wayno.

Nick turned to look at the warden who had been writing in his pocket almanac while he waited for the family. He raised an open palm towards the bison and nodded in a dull way as a signal for Nick to shoot.

Nick hoisted the new rifle up to his right shoulder and stood with his feet sideways to the animal. He held the gun as still as possible by tightening his whole body, but the crosshairs wavered from the buffalo's nose to its tail. He lowered the gun, shook out his left arm and cleared his throat. He kept his eye on the bison so that his grandfather wouldn't say anything else to him. He wiped his right hand on his pant leg and blew on his fingers the way his father did before throwing dice or pulling slot machines. He stared at the shaggy neck of the animal and pretended it was a Coke bottle.

No sooner did Nick have the neck lined up and he began tightening his finger, when a barking dog belonging to one of the hunters scared the bull into a run. Nick swung the gun wide to find the bull through the sight then pulled the trigger when he saw brown. He heard the bullet hit like a rock dropped in a paint pot. Just like Wayno told him he would. His body relaxed as if every part of him had just completed a long awaited sneeze.

"I got him. I heard it." He put the gun down and squinted across the field of hardened mud. One hundred yards in front of Nick lie a heap of brown, kicking fur.

"You've gotta go in for it," the warden said. "You didn't kill it."

From the tone of the warden's voice, Nick knew something had gone more wrong than not killing the animal. He felt elated and distracted, like the time he had made it down a

sharp, curved trail on his skis only to turn around and realize his mother had run into a tree. The warden was already calling through the bullhorn for the hunters to hold their fire.

"Wayno," Lennart said from the tailgate, "Wayno, you have to take the boy out and show him how to finish off that calf."

Nick turned to look at the herd of animals through his binoculars and only then noticed the reddish color of the animal he had shot and its clean, tufted tail. Carpeted legs still spun in the air as the calf on the ground tried to roll back up to its feet. Nick turned away from the field and walked to the truck. He set his gun on the hood as if it were a forgotten toy.

"Oh, I am sorry. I am so stupid. Sorry Wayno. Sorry."

Wayno leaned against the truck with his back turned to Nick, his head resting on the crook of his arm. He said nothing but smoked a cigarette as he stared into the window of the truck.

"Well, some hunter had to kill the calf," the warden said. "I can understand if you would rather have me finish it off, though." The warden looked at the low position of the sun and then looked at all the hunters who waited at their cars for their turn. "If one of you could just follow me out there to drag it off the field."

Aside from leaning his weight to his other hip, Wayno didn't react to the warden either. He blew his smoke towards

the ground and tapped his cigarette on the rear view mirror.

The warden bounced the bullhorn against his thigh and stared at the family for direction. "Well then, I'll get my gun. It's just over in my truck. Actually I can probably haul the calf back here myself."

"Whatever," Wayno said.

The calf began making high pitched bellows that drifted through the valley like the uneven sounds of a circling finger on wet crystal. Nick watched the calf roll on its back in the frozen dirt. If he hadn't shot the calf himself, he might have thought the animal was scratching bugs off its back. It moved like a young animal, wriggling and twisting as though it hadn't yet grown into one piece. The legs, hips and head all swung in scattered directions, no body part synchronized with anything else.

"What should we do Grandpa?"

Lennart turned and patted down his blowing hair.

"Depends on who you are," he said, and began walking across the meadow towards the shot animal.

In three, quick strides Nick caught up with his grandfather. The two walked past the warden and out onto the crushed field. Nick swung his arms in time with his grandfather's and stepped in the same frozen ruts, paying attention to things that were easy to pay attention to. He watched Lennart weave in and out of the mud craters with his head down, singing his favorite ballad about strong-hipped women and bouncing row boats.

By the time the two had reached the bison, Wayno had jogged out to meet them. It was the first time Nick had ever seen his mother's boyfriend jog anywhere. Wayno always seemed to have the time to walk. He had left his jacket back at the truck and stood comfortably in the cloudy cold in his undershirt and sunglasses. "You know, I just can't believe you shot a fucking calf. I mean, that's like shooting your own dog."

The three of them stared at the calf at their feet. It kicked its legs and rolled its head causing its body to flip over from side to side. Nick inspected the holes in its hips and tried to figure out whether the entry hole looked different from the exit hole. He squatted down to touch the calf's tail. It looked like a used, wire-bristled paintbrush.

The calf didn't flinch when Nick touched its tail, so he patted its flanks. The calf kicked at the hand that fingered too close to its wound, and Nick backed away. He estimated that the animal was about the size and shape of Wayno's driver lawn mower.

"Come on, let's get this over with. Where's the gun?" Wayno asked.

Nick looked at all their hands and then around the ground in a circle. He squinted back towards the truck and saw his rifle on the hood of the truck. "I guess I forgot it."

"What were you going to kill it with?" Wayno said.

"I can go back and get it. It will just take a second."

Wayno waved in the direction of the cars. "There's no time. Don't you see that they're all waiting for us?"

Nick looked out across the field at the semicircle of hunters who all held their guns down at their knees waiting. In the middle of the crowd, resting against his truck, stood the warden with his bullhorn in one hand and his rifle in the other. He looked like he expected the family to botch things up again.

"What are we gonna do then?"

"Your grandfather used to finish bears off with his knife. He was a great hunter. This calf will be easy for him."

Lennart had been looking at the waiting crowd also, and at Wayno's suggestion pulled his long-bladed knife from its sheath that hung at his hip. The knife was sharp and well cared for, a gift given to him by a Blackfoot Indian. He held the knife easily in his palm and ran his chubby thumb across the blade. "This is my knife," Lennart said and looked up at Wayno and Nick as if he had just found a missing wrench in a neighbor's tool box.

"Yeah, that's right," Wayno said, and stared at Lennart with a tensed concentration as if he waited to see whether Lennart would remember his name after a bang on the head.

"Wayno," Lennart said, "you hold the head tight and I'll straddle the body." He pushed the blade into the dirt by Nick's tennis shoe and looked up at him. "We'll hold him

down while you cut."

Nick looked back and forth from Lennart to Wayno, not breathing in hopes of spotting some sign of a joke. But Wayno was already scrutinizing the head of the calf to figure the best way to hold it, and his grandfather still had on his Simple Simon face, as though he were proud of himself for choosing the best piece of pie in an unfamiliar cafe.

"Go deep and hard like you were cutting into a watermelon," Lennart said when he saw his grandson's confusion.

Nick looked at the calf's thick neck and tight, perfect hide. He tried to imagine the sound of breaking through the young neck with own hands. "Grandpa, you're better at this. Won't you do it?"

Lennart's eyes refocussed as though Nick had finally said something in the right language. "You know I'm not a hunter any more. Wayno, give the boy your sunglasses so he doesn't get blood in his eyes."

Wayno pulled off his plastic sunglasses by the stem, cleaned them on the front of his shirt, and handed them up to Nick.

Nick slid them on and held his finger on the bridge of the glasses as he squatted down for the knife. The wind had begun to gust sporadic jets of rain and the drops hit the sunglasses like wasps on a windshield. He dried the rain spattered handle on his t-shirt and held it loosely in his palm like he had seen punks in movies hold switchblades.

"Hold it like a pick, not a pan," Lennart said stepping one long leg over the calf and digging his feet into the ground for traction. "It's here that you want to cut." He ran his finger along the fine, stubbled fur wrapped around the calf's neck. "He's all muscle there, so use your body weight to get the knife in."

Not giving Nick time to ask questions, Lennart threw himself on the calf. The calf wriggled and twisted like an undefeated wrestler about to be pinned, but Lennart pressed it flat as a road kill. The calf's screams, sounding like the notes of an unpracticed clarinet, shook Nick into a sweat until Wayno's slippery hand squeezed the animal's jaw into the ground.

Nick looked at his grandfather whose face was losing air and turning purple. He held the calf's front legs tightly in his smooth, white hands and a roll of the old man's belly hung over the bloody wound of the calf.

"You're getting blood on your belt buckle, Grandpa."

Lennart said nothing and didn't look up. Nick stared at the indentations that his grandfather's elbows made in the calf's side. The calf began another battle and Wayno stretched the animal's neck into a U shape so that the calf seemed to be looking backwards for its tail.

Nick stooped over the neck of the animal and could see its eyes rolling wildly. Nick thought that it was probably looking for something big and brown to come to its rescue. He set the edge of the blade against the line Lennart had

pointed out to him.

"Two hands. You'll need two hands. And down from the top. You're not carving a turkey."

Nick pointed the tip down vertically, put his elbows into his ribs, and pushed his body weight against the blunt handle of the knife. The knife squeaked in like a wet, bare foot in a rubber boot and came to rest at the hilt. The animal screamed from under Wayno's hand so loudly that Wayno tucked his knees in toward's the animal's head so that his body would muffle the sounds.

"Pull it down towards the ground now, and you'll be done."

Nick rearranged his hands so he could push the handle rather than pull it. His fingers slipped around the smooth handle, and his movements sent up warm drafts that smelled like hot pennies. Nick jerked the knife down in the same movement that he used to jack up Wayno's truck when he had a flat.

Blood shot from the neck of the animal as though it were a popped water balloon. The hot, sticky liquid didn't flow from the animal like Nick had anticipated, but rather spewed like the geisers of Yellowstone, powerful and regular. Having turned away from the animal at the last second, Nick's face was clean of blood, but on his neck and chest were paisley patterns of crimson.

The animal calmed quickly, its body only twitching like a deep sleeper. The blood pulsed weaker from the cut, and

Nick thought that the calf wasn't looking like it was in pain so much as it looked sleepy. Nick wished the animal would shut its eyes. He scraped his thumbnail across the calves polished, black hooves then pulled at the cockleburs in the dying animal's fur.

Nick would have remained kneeling in the field watching for the calf's eyes to roll back, but Wayno reminded him that the warden was on a time schedule and the other hunters were watching them. "They're probably impressed as hell with you, but the longer they have to wait for you the more you're gonna look like a fine bison to them," he said. Lennart laughed with Wayno.

Lennart took hold of the calf's hind legs and Wayno held a foreleg. They needed Nick to stand up and grab hold of the other foreleg before they stopped laughing, but he didn't. Wayno looked over Nick's head to Lennart, and Lennart tipped his head towards the truck. Wayno picked up the other leg and the two began stumbling in an awkward pitch away from Nick. Wayno's legs bumped into the head that bobbed at their steps and brushed along the ground.

Nick caught up to their slow pace and walked a few steps behind. He read the hunters tag he had unfolded from his back pocket, and he was glad his name wasn't on it.

Being Animal

What I remember the best from Sunday school is the treat-your-neighbor-like-you-want-to-be-treated story. The one about the heretic who helps an injured man after two not so good "good" guys passed the injured man by. This good Samaritan was a man who knew the true definition of neighbor.

Not long ago I found myself talking with a friend of my daughter's who had a political slogan on her t-shirt in support of animal rights. I asked her what she knew about her t-shirt, being six and all, and she listed a nauseous repertoire of blood and guts stories, the common theme being what humans do to animals. Being a late bloomer, I've never trusted children with political savvy, but something about this young girl's advocacy was naked and authentic.

She finished her list and paused. "You know," she said, "I get so sad when I think about what they're doing to those guys." Guys. Though the stories were someone else's, she knew the essence of her t-shirt slogan. Her definition of neighbor, like many children's, included animals.

* * *

"We've got to feed Sigmond before we set out the mats," Amber explained to me.

"Who's Sigmund?" This was my first day teaching at a preschool in Missoula.

"Our pet," two girls answered as they elbowed each other out of the way so I could peak into the aquarium.

The first thing that caught my eye was Sigmund's thick, hairless tail, but what caused me to step back from the aquarium was his amazing size.

"You have a pet rat."

"Yeah, will you take him out for us?"

I had visions of Ernest Borgnine being eaten alive.

"Our other teacher takes him out."

The bubonic plague. Blue boils in people's arm pits and crotches. I knew; my family had the Time Life picture book of diseases.

Sensing my dread, ten kids ran to their cubbies for their lunch boxes and searched madly through their baggies, waxed paper and tinfoil.

They lined up their presents on the carpet: a rice cake with peanut butter, Cheetos, gummy bears, and fruit roll ups.

They waited on their knees, staring up at the aquarium where Sigmund knowingly scurried from end to end.

Picking up Sigmund by the tail would have been like lifting a basset hound by its tail, and I realized I was going to have to wrap my hands under his stomach. Sigmund looked like he ate forearms for breakfast.

Sigmund's feet and jaws were moving before he even hit the floor, but I was the only one who jumped back upon his

release. The kids leaned in closer and poked food up to his mouth so he didn't have to walk to the next treat. Sigmund's smorgasboard, I was to learn as the school year went on, was a daily event that the preschoolers looked forward to almost more than eating lunch themselves. They only fed him their favorite foods because that is what you do for your animal.

Gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, even mice are animals that I can understand being attached to, but what makes an animal endearing to me would be a shallow criteria for those children. Although I never walked comfortably when Sigmund was on the loose, the kids thought he was as loveable as their grandmothers. They were kids.

A kid can show you how to be an animal's special human. Some adults call this displaced affection or some other smart word, but I call it a connection. Those preschoolers felt a devotion to Sigmund that I only feel towards my own children. The occasional tenderness that I glimpse between an adult and a favorite dog was the norm between a whole classroom of children and a rat.

I've seen children whose friendships with animals were more important to them than their friendships with their siblings. They knew their pet's expressions, their habits, their needs and their favorite foods. More than I know or care about many of my friends.

And children are loyal to animals. In the same way that we adults judge other adults when we find they are racist or sexist, children often make judgements when they discover a

person is a "specieist." Like parents who want to know about their children's teen-age friends, kids want to know just where you stand with animals.

My niece came to visit my husband and me for a couple days, and she noticed that we had a mouse living under the stove in the pots and pans drawer. He'd zoom along the baseboards of the kitchen from under the fridge to under the sink.

"You have a mouse in your house," she said.

"Yeah, I know."

"Are you gonna kill it?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well then, what do you feed him?"

"We don't feed him." My niece didn't know what to think about me after that. Was I for him or was I against him? You need to make decisions about these things. A few days after she left I found a pyramid of cornflakes that she had carefully piled next to the toilet plunger.

My feeling is that children sometimes feel even closer to their pets than to their parents. Even good parents. I think the reason for this loyalty is that the animals' behaviors are often more understandable to the children than their parents' behaviors.

What sounds like more fun to a kid, gardening like Mom likes to do, or batting a hockey puck around the kitchen floor like the dog likes? Is it more interesting to watch the news with Dad, or to stalk grasshoppers with the cat?

Though children will sometimes play make believe and act like they think adults act, they spend the majority of their time acting like animals: chasing, hiding, tackling, screaming, wrestling, spinning, and falling. Children like the ways animals behave, and children like themselves when they behave like animals.

Why are children's best friends often animals? Perhaps they haven't yet been taught to not be animals themselves.

* * *

On this particular afternoon of preschool, I was the fearsome grizzly bear.

"Hmm, I smell a balogna sandwich at that picnic table, I wonder if those kids would feed me." I ramble towards the preschoolers. "RRRROWL!"

"We won't hurt you, so don't hurt us." They waved their bug-bitten arms slowly and talked quietly to me, the bear.

"Huff, huff, snort and growl."

"We're going away now, don't follow us." They walked backwards, but I came in for a closer look anyways. All 15 "bear aware" campers dropped to their knees in a tuck and covered the backs of their necks with their stubby fingers.

We practiced bear encounters for a whole week before going up to Snowbowl in June to visit what to skiers is known as Paradise run, but to us was known as prime bear habitat.

From the "apres ski" deck, we set out into the lupine

and clover, up past the bunny hill tow rope and onto the traverse trail that would take us into the woods and up to Paradise where I had seen a bear the year before. Between clanging soup cans, home made rattles, and necklaces of jingle bells I didn't count on even seeing a bird. Many water breaks and stick collections later, we arrived at the steep, sunny slope.

With the bugs, the burns and the fear, our hike had every component of an activity doomed to failure, but then someone found a bear sign. We all tripped over to the pile of purplish-black bear scat and circled it in awe.

"He really lives here," one of the kids said, and poked his pointer finger into the center of the pile to show us it was real.

We imagined that somewhere, from behind some wide Ponderosa, a bear was hiding, keeping an eye on us. The steep, exhausting hillside changed appearance as remarkably as if we were standing in the snow. Instead of swatting at scratchy knapweed and thistles, the preschoolers decided they were bears.

The bears rolled over logs and scratched their backs on trees, nibbled at imaginary huckleberries, and then lied down in the weeds to take a sun bath like they saw the bears do in "Ranger Rick." Of course we never saw the bear, but by the time we stumbled back to the bus, everyone had been a bear for an afternoon.

I've lived around bears now for four years, the

same amount of time that most of those kids have been alive. It has taken me those four years to become comfortable enough to go on a walk by myself in the woods, and I am three times the size and strength of those kids and about 100 times more rational. I know how slim the chances are of me ever being mauled by a bear. But while those kids pretended they were sun bears, snoozing on the mountainside, I sat on a rock keeping my eyes out for big movements.

It wasn't like the campers started the trip out being brave. But something happened when they became bears that allowed them to see that bear's life as a way of living, not something that had been created to scare them. I could only watch. I have a good imagination, but I don't have the instincts to really be a bear anymore. They were taught out of me.

Later that summer I watched two boys walk along the banks of the Clark Fork River and hunch down every couple steps to poke at a snake that moved with difficulty. They had force-fed the snake a ball point pen.

My husband can show me the exact bend in the creek near his childhood home where he dropped a boulder on a giant blue bullfrog.

My grandfather still cries when he retells of the time when he killed a sparrow in front of his own grandfather and made the old man cry. My grandfather never killed anything after that.

It's not an American phenomenon, this torturing of animals by children. In India children impale dragon flies with toothpicks that are attached to a string so they can fly the bugs like kites. Bored Mexican children tie sows' back feet together so that they can't get away from their sharp-toothed piglets.

This cruelty seems like such a contradiction to me, a major crack in my notion of children's kinship with animals. I'm holding children up as models of human connectedness with animals, so where does this brutality fit in? I think that these are the children who have begun pulling away. A result of learning that we humans are a special kind of animal, different from the others. And as most lessons go, it is us adults who teach them the difference.

"But it is part of our culture. Part of Easter is bunnies and chicks." An acquaintance from my aerobics class wanted to buy a chick for her son Justin.

"The Spanish will tell you you're culturally ignorant if you're against bull fights too," I said.

"That's not the same. You can't compare those kids with matadors."

I had to agree, that if I didn't know better, I'd have to say that the scene in Southgate mall was the picture of Christian love. Toddlers with dumbstruck hands carefully cupping yellow, peeping cotton balls while older children hunched over the bunny cages to gently flatten the rabbits'

soft ears to their backs. Who wouldn't want this scene at their home Easter morning?

"What are you going to do with it when it becomes an ugly, independent chicken that wants to peck at things on the ground and flap around in the dust?"

"We have always cared for our pets," she said and made a big show of turning her head to face me.

"Yeah, but what do you do with a chicken in the suburbs? Where will you put it? I mean, do you leave him outside while you're at work? Make a trap door so he can get in when he's cold? It's a chicken, not a cat."

She bought the chick anyways, and I asked her about the chicken every week in aerobics.

The day she got rid of the chicken she told me that the chicken had been happier for a couple weeks than he would have been at a factory farm. He still had a beak. She had to have thought about that explanation for weeks, and it shut me up.

My mind raced during the jog and squats, and by the time we were doing fire hydrants I had a pretty good idea what bothered me about the whole situation. It wasn't just the issue of that particular chicken's life. It is, actually, hard for me to empathize with a chicken.

Here's what I came up with. What did this experience teach Justin? That when he gets tired of his animal, when the animal becomes too great an inconvenience, he can get rid of it. I happen to know that he is expected to treat his

toys better than that. Justin is learning the culturally correct relationship between humans and animals.

One of the things we do in this world is use animals. We kill animals for some silly reasons: a tasty dinner, a fancy coat, colorful cosmetics, an exciting hunting weekend. To use animals as we do, we have to distance ourselves from them. And we have ways as adults to do that. If you want to break down a person's devotion to animals, call him a sentimentalist or ask if he's one of those radical animal liberationists. In the mean time, don't use the word kill. We've got better words like cull, take, control, sacrifice and euthanize.

You don't even need to say the word animal. Elmer Davis from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks complained in the Missoulian the other day that poaching was a "wanton, deliberate waste of resource." A waste of a resource? Is that like intentionally leaving your car running when you dash into the drugstore? He says that poachers deprive hunters of their "opportunities." Harry doesn't get to kill a buck because Ralph already killed it. The paper won't say that. It's helping us keep our distance so we can buy chicks for our children at Easter time then throw them away.

I sound harsh and perfect in my condemnation of my acquaintance, but I know I'm also part of the problem. I found myself rearranging my daughter's ideas of how humans should treat animals when I took her to the circus in Missoula.

"When's the bears?"

"Wait and see." Laura was one of the bears at Snowbowl the summer before, and was anxious to see her first real bear.

We stared amazed as Tina Yerfeeta twirled in a pink sequined tornadoe thirty feet in the air, suspended only by the bit in her mouth, and we craned our necks to see a man run like a gerbil on a giant rodent exercise wheel. We watched men scream past the audience selling sticky, glazed apples, pastel popcorn balls and mounds of cotton candy. Laura was in an exotic swirl of cartoon land where no one and nothing looked like anyone she had seen as yet in her four years.

Finally, from the far corner of the arena came the silhouettes of ten swaying bears, eight humped grizzlies, a slim black bear, and behaving like a puppy on the end of a leash, a grizzly cub. Two trainers poked the bears' arm pits if they dropped down to four feet, so the parade of bears clomped awkwardly into the center ring with thalidomide arms pulled limply into their chests.

"What's on their mouths?" asked a boy from the family next to us.

"Muzzles so they won't attack the people," dad explained.

Each bear had its own colored barrel to perch its round end on, and all but the cub slumped inactively waiting for its turn to perform. No signs of animal life, the grizzled

bears needed no chains or whips to keep them in their places.

Bear by bear, they took turns making the audience laugh: pushing a scooter, taking a poodle for a walk, and dancing like a ballerina in a custom made grizzly tutu.

Then came the stunt that everyone had been anticipating. Klondike Mike poked the black bear off his star-painted stool and the two walked arm in arm towards the bear-sized Harley Davidson at the edge of the ring. The bear rolled onto the bike, short stubby legs poking over each side of the wide seat, and forelegs propped on the made-for-hands handle bars. A sharp kick by the trainer started up the motor and the bear was off. But he must have been new to motorcycling because midway round the inner circle the bear's paw slipped off the handlebar, and the huge cycle toppled, just missing the bear.

As Klondike Mike prepared the bike for the second half of the run, his beautiful assistant tried to poke the black bear back towards the motorcycle, but the bear seemed done for the day. Back and forth, the slender bear paced in front of the other bears, leaving behind him a trail of foot prints where he had stepped in his own excrement. From the moment he fell off the motorcycle, the bear had lost control of his bowels, and had decorated the ring with brown streaks as he tried to keep away from the motorcycle and the poking rod. Finally he jumped back onto his stool, and the crowd gave him a big round of applause. A "good try" round of applause.

Laura clapped with the crowd and smiled at the father

next to us who knew how to whistle between two fingers.

When their act was over we watched the bears head towards the shaft of light coming out of the basketball lockerrooms. As they reached the far stage corner, the trainers allowed them to drop back onto all fours.

From where we sat, we could see the bears lolling up the cement ramp, once again able to use their sturdy front legs to walk. They brushed haunches and bumped into eachother in easy strides. The cub, finally loose, yanked the ears and ran under the heavy stomachs of the adult grizzlies. The trainers followed the bears up the ramp looking like stern police breaking up a party.

At intermission I lied and told Laura the circus was over. On our way out Laura spotted the bear cages behind a partition and wanted to take a look. We pressed our faces into the crack and saw one of the somersaulters alone in a cage that was just big enough that it could turn around. The bear sat hunched over, swinging its head from side to side, no place to hide from the eyes of the other animals and people. One foot away the cub lay on its side in a smaller cage stretching its paw out of the bars and knocking on the metal of the other's cage.

I took Laura to the circus because the circus was part of my own childhood culture, like trick or treat and the tooth fairy. But I passed her a tradition that I'm no longer comfortable with.

Teaching Laura how to pet our cat with love, how to

watch the ducks in the Bitterroot River without throwing rocks at them, and how to hold a frog low down to the ground in case it wants to jump-- all these lessons were contradicted when I paid for the two of us to see animals get poked, chained and caged.

Bears somersaulting and riding motorcycles--that was Laura's first sight of real bears. Marvelous, yes. Bears are marvelous. But not because they can jump on pogo sticks. On this winter afternoon I helped Laura take a couple steps away from the animal world.

So what am I trying to say, that we shouldn't be teaching our children how to be civilized? That we should spend our evenings wrestling instead of reading? It's hard to see how my day would look different if I were more in touch with animals, but I'm sure I understood some things about my world and myself when I was a child that I now only glimpse in my dreams.

I don't know how to appreciate the animal part of me anymore, but maybe I can try to not steal it from my children. It seems this requires more than just being patient with their screams and their games. It means encouraging a gentle ethic between children and animals. It means asking myself more questions than I often have the energy to answer.

"How would you like it if he did that to you?" I say in hopes of teaching that old Sunday school lesson to my child

when she clobbers the neighbor. But maybe it's time for me to extend my definition of neighbor.

Immanuel Kant believed that "he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealing with men." He believed that he could judge the heart of a man by his treatment of animals. Modern academics support this philosopher's ideas. Studies show that adults who physically violate other people were children who violated animals. Same soup with a different smell.

I don't feel like I need a philosopher or a psychologist to tell me something that I know most of the time, but still, I was the one who bought two admissions to the circus.

I read with fascination the stories of cultures that make little distinction between man and animal, I respect the metaphors of poets that unite us with our animal siblings, and I believe in a science that connects us with manatees, aardvarks and flightless cormorants. Still, I act as though animals are profoundly different from us. I know I'm sending twisted messages.

"Come on, do something. Don't just sit there." A skinny surfer man threw ice cubes one by one from his Big Gulp go-cup at the two reclining gorillas at the San Diego Zoo.

Thonk. A cube bounced off the chest of the gorilla who lay spread eagle under the shade of his cage's cement overhang which was meant to substitute for a cave. The big

head that rolled to look the direction of the ice slinger seemed to rise out of its gorilla body like the foot hills of a mountain compared to our little flower-heads growing off shaky stems. Layers of inflexible muscle from shoulders to ears--turning his head was an effort.

His black eyes stared out at the class of second graders who were imprinting the steel fence onto their forearms and stomachs.

"Don't look at us, we didn't do it Mr. Gorilla," screamed an Asian boy who was, of the whole class, the most knotted into the fence.

Mrs. Simpson, I know her name because she carried labelled lesson plans with her through the zoo field trip, gave her student the look of, "wait till we get back to the bus," and then turned to see who did throw the ice.

Thonk, thonk. Surfer man threw a couple at once and this time hit the bigger gorilla who sat facing the crowd as though he were watching T.V. One of the cubes hit the puffy-looking pads of the gorilla's foot. The gorilla pushed himself away from the cement wall with his elbows, and slowly, like a pregnant woman reaching across the floor for the popcorn bowl, bent through his straddled legs to grab the cube. Like a practiced pitcher, the gorilla dropped his forearm, pulled his elbow high, began to raise his wrist for the throw, and then stopped.

All the children along the fence had pulled back and stepped away from the fence. Surfer man laughed and put his

arm around his weight-lifter girlfriend. The gorilla popped the cube into his mouth and again leaned back against the wall.

The Asian kid looked at Mrs. Simpson to see what she was going to say to surfer man, but she pretended not to see him and instead stared past him towards the giraffes as if there was something more important to deal with there.

"Hey mister, cut it out. Quit bugging them," said the Asian kid. Mrs. Simpson remained fascinated with the giraffes.

Surfer man didn't look at the boy, but instead hauled out a whole fist-full of cubes and wung them into the cage, this time clobbering both the gorillas with the shiny squares.

What happened next will remain forever in my memory, and I know thirty kids who won't forget either. The still reclining gorilla tucked his feet under him then slowly stretched up to his full, square gorilla size. Coming down heavy with each step, the gorilla stomped up twenty feet from the viewers to the edge of the built-up plateau. Then very methodically, he turned his back to the viewers, put his hand underneath his rear end, and shat into his hand.

Every kid in Mrs. Simpson's second grade stared fascinated at the gorilla's handful of excrement.

Before anyone could get out of the way, the gorilla turned back to face the viewers and catapulted that fresh handful at the surfer man.

Shit was everywhere, on everyone, and gorilla shit, I know now, does not smell any better than the worst of piles. Mrs. Simpson had it on her lesson plans, most of the kids had scatterings of brown on their bright California clothes, but it was the surfer man and his girlfriend that wore the weight of the throw.

I have noticed that people who as a group get splattered by a mud puddle, get drenched in the rain, or get stuck working in an office where the sewer lines just broke, tend to laugh at the situation together with a sort of "oh well" kind of attitude. But this was not such a situation. Everyone knew that it was by no accident that they had feces dripping from their cotton shorts and sporty sneakers.

However, not one smelly kid said, "stupid gorilla." They knew where the blame belonged.

The Asian boy rubbed his finger under a brown blob that rested on his Deaf Leopard t-shirt and flicked it towards the surfer man. "Here, I think this was meant for you." It fell short, but I'm sure he was a class hero anyways.

Mrs. Simpson said nothing, but as the second grade class headed towards the public restrooms, she rested her hand on the Asian boy's shoulder. Maybe she was hoping his empathy for animals would rub off on her.